

Women in Leadership: Barriers to Upward Social Mobility



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INTRODUCTION

“I am woman, hear me roar” is the opening line of a popular 1970s song by Helen Reddy that has become the anthem for many women. The words command you to listen to women being hailed in a non-stereotypical and non-submissive role. The song progresses to the chorus in a triumphant battle cry: “I am strong, I am invincible, I am woman...” The popularity of the song in the early 1970s is bedded in a second wave of feminism as women were seeking to stand “toe- toe” with their male counterparts. Fast forward to pop sensation Beyoncé’s “Queen B’s” song “Run the World (Girls)” in 2011 where she passionately affirms that men know” ... we’re smart enough to make these millions, strong enough to bear the children, then get back to business.” The popularity of the song as marked by the millions in sales suggests a universal agreement that women have successfully demonstrated that they can achieve the balance of being the primary nurturers in their children’s lives while still being leaders in businesses and their communities. “My persuasion can build a nation, endless power...” This affirmation by the Queen of Pop, Beyoncé is still necessary as women’s social mobility is severely limited because of beliefs in their limitations and lack of opportunities and mentorship. Although women still do not rule the world, the discussion continues (Harris, 2001).

In this the 21st century, women’s role in leadership position is still challenged by the Glass Ceiling. The Department of Labor in 1991 defined the “Glass Ceiling” as the “artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization into management-level positions (Johns, 2013).” In 1991 the United States Congress determined that, despite a dramatically growing presence in the workplace, women and minorities remained underrepresented in management positions in business and that artificial barriers were inhibiting their advancement. Consequently, in Title II of the Civil Rights Act of 1991, Congress enacted the Glass Ceiling Act establishing the Glass Ceiling Commission. The purpose of the commission was to study:

- The manner in which businesses fill management and decision-making positions;
- The developmental and skill-enhancing practices used to foster the necessary qualifications for advancement into such positions;
- The compensation programs and reward structures currently utilized in the workplace; and
- The creation of an annual award for excellence in promoting a more diverse skilled workforce at the management and decision-making levels in business (Johns, 2013)."

“More than 50% of the employees at the lower levels in organizations are female. At higher levels in the organization, the number of women decreases significantly. At the CEO level worldwide, there are only 3% to 4% who are women” (Men, 2016). In 2016, women are still experiencing barriers to upward social mobility as supported by these numbers. Carly Fiorina in 1999 upon being selected as chief ex-

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executive of the Hewlett-Packard Company stated in response to her promotion, “I hope that we are at a point that everyone has figured out that there is not a glass ceiling... My gender is interesting but really not the subject of the story here (Markoff, 1999) “. In her memoir, written eight years later, she recounts multiple instances when she experienced sexism and was called “bimbo” or “bitch” (Ely & Rhode, 2010). Ms. Fiorina was a candidate in the 2016 race for the President of United States was the only woman on the Republican ticket. The example of Carly and so many other women in similar scenarios demonstrate that the complex issue of a woman’s qualifications, are often judged more harshly than the qualifications of similarly situated male counterparts, and women face more barriers to leadership positions because of the limitations placed upon gender roles, not just for the workforce, but as a general societal issue.

The Glass Ceiling

The numbers do not lie. Even in 2016, women are clearly underrepresented in leadership, McMahon (2016) stated “Women are 51 percent of the population but only 20 percent of Congress. Women earn the majority of college degrees but on average only make 78 cents on the dollar. Women make 80 percent of household spending decisions, but only 5 percent of Fortune 500 companies are led by women. Only 17 percent of corporate board members are women. This is not about setting quotas, but about having a diversity of perspectives and experiences in decision-making roles. We are making progress, but there are still glass ceilings that need to be cracked.” Consequently, in 2016 as the most powerful nation in the world, United States of America still has not elected a female President, lagging behind many nations, some of which are considered more patriarchal, discriminatory and less developed thus theoretically more in need of gender equality reform. Countries as diverse as: England, Israel, Pakistan, India, and Jamaica have all had a female leader. Albeit, these leaders of their countries have been called derogatory names such as England’s Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was called “Attila the Hen,” Gold Meir of Israel was called the “only man in the cabinet,” President Richard Nixon called India’s Indira Gandhi “the old witch”. Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan was assassinated after her second stint as Prime Minister of Pakistan (Ely & Rhode, 2010).

The Barriers

The barriers that limit social mobility for women include: lack of managerial experience, insufficient opportunities, socially constructed gender differences, stereotypes, built in mentoring in the “old boy network,” and “tokenism” (Oakley, 2000). Tokenism as defined by Kanter in her pivotal work on gender and tokenism states that women in male dominated occupations experience challenges such as increased visibility and social isolation because of the skewed gender proportions in such fields. Stereotypes and perceptions that men are leaders and women are supporters are dominant train of thoughts and persisting beliefs which impact the mobility of women (Kanter, 1977). Eagly posits that “The stereotype of men is more similar to the stereotype of leaders.” Consequently, women are often not seen as “tough enough” or having “what it takes” to be promoted to leadership positions beyond middle management (Eagly & Carli, 2007)

The expectation of women leaders is measured against them in comparison to male leaders. If women are considered too assertive, they can be viewed negatively as being “just like a man”. If they take a softer, more stereotypically feminine approach, they are then viewed as soft or even incompetent. Eagly uses the example of Democratic Party front-runner, former First Lady and Presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton, a skilled, confident, experienced woman, but is however criticized for not being warm and fuzzy

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