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Glass Ceiling Effect and Feminist Perspectives in Human Resource Management

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Abstract

The Glass Ceiling effect continues to be one of the most significant challenges in human resources management, limiting women's access to higher leadership and decision – making Roles. Feminist perspectives highlight how gender bias organizational culture, and systemic inequalities reinforced barriers to women's career progression despite equal qualifications and performance. This paper examines the glass ceiling through the lens of feminist theory, focusing on how human resource management policies and practices can either perpetuate or dismantle gendered power structure in the workplace. It explores in intersections of gender, leadership and organizational behaviour, arguing that traditional human resource approaches often overlook invisible discrimination, such as subtle stereotype, networking exclusion, and biased evaluation system. Drawing upon feminist critiques, the study emphasizes the need for gender – sensitive recruitment, transparent promotion processes, mentorship programs, and diversity – driven leadership development. Ultimately, feminist – informed human resource management not only challenges the patriarchal norms embedded in organizational hierarchies but also fosters inclusive environments that recognize and reward women's contributions equally. Addressing the glass ceiling is not just an issue of fairness but a strategic necessity for organizations seeking innovations equity and sustainable growth.

Keywords: Glass ceiling, feminism, human resource management, Gender bias, workplace, equality, women in leadership diversity and inclusion, organizational culture.

1. Introduction

This assignment explores the persistent and complex phenomenon of the "glass ceiling" within modern workplaces, examining it through the critical lens of feminist perspectives in Human Resource Management (HRM). Though significant progress has been made toward gender equality in the workplace, invisible yet formidable barriers continue to prevent qualified women from advancing to senior leadership and executive positions. This study argues that to fully understand and dismantle these obstacles, it is essential to move beyond simply acknowledging their existence and instead analyze them using the theoretical frameworks provided by feminist thought.

The analysis will focus on how feminist perspectives reveal the deep-seated, systemic biases that underpin the glass ceiling. It will investigate how traditional HRM practices and organizational cultures, which often operate under the guise of meritocracy, can unconsciously perpetuate gendered inequalities. This includes scrutinizing issues such as discriminatory hiring and promotion procedures, gender-based stereotypes, and the undervaluation of roles and competencies historically associated with women.

By integrating feminist theory, this paper will illuminate the social, psychological, and organizational factors that contribute to the gender gap at the top of the corporate ladder. It aims to demonstrate that effective solutions require a fundamental shift in both organizational mindset and practice, moving from superficial diversity initiatives to a genuine re-evaluation of how human resources are managed. Ultimately, the assignment will conclude that a feminist approach is not only critical for understanding the glass ceiling but also for developing the equitable and inclusive HRM strategies necessary to shatter it for good.

2. Meaning

Glass Ceiling In HR term glass ceiling refers to an artificial barrier based on attitudinal or organizational bias prevents qualified women/other minorities from advancing upward into senior management level positions or situations where the advancement of a qualified person within the hierarchy of an organization is stopped at a lower level because of some form of discrimination, most commonly sexism or racism, but since

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the term was coined, "glass ceiling" has also come to describe the limited advancement of the deaf, blind, disabled, and aged. It is believed to be an unofficial, invisible barrier that prevents women and minorities from advancing in businesses or barrier to career advancement an unofficial but real impediment to some body's advancement into upper level management positions because of discrimination based on the person's gender, age, race, ethnicity or sexual Shanlax International Journal of Commerce.

3. Reasons for Glass Ceiling

Late 1970s – Early 1980s:

- Women lacked required experience and skills
- They were restricted to clerical and other support services jobs

Mid – Late 1980s:

- Trends started changing
- More women took up higher education in management
- Looked for careers in operating areas
- The debate over the existence of the Glass Ceiling began

Problems in Developing Countries:

- Culture issues
- Male Chauvinism
- Marriage
- Corporate organisations do not favour women
- Unwritten rule of not employing women

Women Managers are praised for:

- Soft Skills
- Caring
- Understanding
- Good teamwork
- Good communication skills
- Patience
- Perseverance
- Style of Management
- Unique skills

4. History of Glass Ceiling

The term "glass ceiling" was first used in 1984 by Gay Bryant, editor of Working Woman magazine, to describe the invisible barrier preventing women from advancing beyond middle management. The phrase gained popularity after being featured in a 1986 Wall Street Journal article by Carol Hymowitz and Timothy Schellhardt. The "ceiling" symbolizes a limit to career growth, while the word "glass" implies that the barrier is unseen yet real, allowing women and minorities to see higher positions but not access them.

In 1991, the U.S. Department of Labor officially recognized the glass ceiling as "artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias." The same year, Senator Robert Dole introduced the Glass Ceiling Act under the Civil Rights Act of 1991, signed by President George H. W. Bush. A bipartisan Glass Ceiling Commission was created to study and recommend solutions to this problem. The Glass Ceiling Initiative Report confirmed that women and minorities were systematically excluded from top corporate positions despite being qualified.

The report highlighted that women made up nearly half of the workforce and earned most master's degrees, yet 95% of senior managers were men. Women managers earned only about 70% of men's salaries, and minorities held less than 1% of top management roles. Even after affirmative action policies, racial and gender disparities persisted, showing that social and organizational biases continued to restrict advancement for women and minorities.

Over time, the glass ceiling concept has evolved to describe similar barriers in various sectors—such as the stained glass ceiling in religion, grass ceiling in agriculture, and political glass ceiling in politics. In academia, women face both a glass ceiling and a maternal wall due to family responsibilities. Contrastingly, the glass elevator or escalator describes how men often rise quickly in female-dominated fields like nursing and teaching, revealing persistent gender inequality in career progression.

5. Review of Literature

Jackson and O'Callaghan (2009), Bendl and Schmidt (2010), and Zeng (2011): The glass ceiling represents subtle but persistent discriminatory barriers that prevent qualified women from reaching top management positions. Li and Leung (2001) describe it as gender-based obstacles that restrict women's advancement to positions of power within organizations.

Cotter *et al.* (2001): The glass ceiling is a unique form of inequality characterized by invisible barriers affecting women despite their education, skills, and experience. It is observed over time as women progress in their careers, with inequalities becoming more pronounced at higher levels of management. They emphasize that these barriers are difficult to detect because modern policies ban open discrimination, and biases often manifest through hidden stereotypes and organizational norms.

Baxter and Wright (2000), Albrecht *et al.* (2003), Elliott and Smith (2004), Prokos and Padavic (2005), Zeng (2011), Dambrin and Lambert (2012), and Lupu (2012): Agree that the glass ceiling is most visible at the top of organizational hierarchies, where women face the greatest difficulty in career advancement despite equal qualifications.

6. Types of Glass Ceiling:

Glass Ceiling Effects - The Gender Wage Gap: The glass ceiling effect reflects the persistent gender wage gap, where women earn less than men despite having similar qualifications, experience, and roles. Hekman *et al.* (2009) revealed that customer bias favors white men, who are perceived as more competent and approachable, leading employers to pay them more because customer satisfaction drives business success. This bias contributes to occupational segregation, where men dominate top-paying managerial and executive roles, while women are overrepresented in lower-paid professions like teaching and childcare. Additionally, Thomas-Hunt and Phillips (2004) found that women with expertise are often viewed as less influential than men with the same skills, and Lyness and Thompson (1997) observed that women's achievements are frequently undervalued or attributed to luck rather than competence. These studies collectively highlight how deep-rooted gender stereotypes and social biases continue to hinder women's advancement and reinforce wage inequality in the workplace.

7. The Glass Ceiling and Disclosure of Sexual Orientation:

The glass ceiling also affects the LGBT community, as disclosure of sexual orientation can influence workplace experiences and career advancement. Ragins (2004) found that revealing one's sexual orientation can have mixed effects—sometimes positive, sometimes negative, or even insignificant—on job satisfaction, psychological well-being, and pay. However, Ragins, Singh, and Cornwell (2007) discovered that disclosure often exposes LGBT employees to risks such as verbal harassment, job loss, and even physical assault, as also supported by D'Augelli& Grossman (2001) and Friskopp& Silverstein (1996). Their study showed that fear of disclosing one's sexual identity limits promotion opportunities and compensation growth, as openness about orientation may trigger discrimination in decisions regarding salary increases, responsibility levels, and eligibility for incentives. This highlights how hidden biases continue to restrict L.GBT employees' upward mobility in organizations.

8. Women Surpassing the Glass Ceiling

Women across the world have steadily been surpassing the glass ceiling—a metaphor introduced by Marilyn Loden in 1978 to describe the invisible barriers that prevent women from advancing to top positions in their careers. Over the decades, women's representation in leadership and power structures has grown remarkably due to social awareness, education, mentorship, and global gender equity movements. As of 2025, women hold 27% of parliamentary seats, 23% of ministerial positions, and 33% of corporate board seats worldwide, reflecting continuous but slow progress in breaking these barriers. Nations like Sweden, France, and Spain have emerged as leaders in gender-inclusive policies, offering paid parental leave, flexible working options, and strong equal pay laws that have propelled women's career advancement. The Economist's 2025 Glass-Ceiling Index ranked Sweden as the best country for working women, followed by Iceland and Finland, highlighting that societies with robust social safety nets and equality-focused governance foster female leadership most effectively. Despite these achievements, challenges persist. Women often face the "glass cliff," a phenomenon where they are appointed to leadership roles during times of crisis, making failure more likely. Additionally, many women—especially those from marginalized or minority backgrounds—confront compounded biases, limited networking opportunities, and lack of mentorship, which hinder further progress. However, increased focus on mentoring, education, and building diverse professional networks has empowered many women to gain the social capital needed to rise through organizational ranks. Visible examples include leaders like Janet Yellen, Kamala Harris, and Susie Wiles, each of whom shattered significant glass ceilings in government and business alike. Today, women are not only breaking the glass ceiling but also redesigning the structure itself—advocating inclusive workplaces, equitable pay, and shared leadership. As international reports stress the need **for** accelerated action, the message is clear: while cracks have formed in the ceiling, complete equity requires sustained global effort, cultural change, and the continuous empowerment of women at every level.

9. Strategies for Career Development:

Breaking the glass ceiling requires confidence, assertiveness, and a proactive approach to career growth. Women and minorities should develop strong communication skills, speak up in meetings, and stay passionate about their career goals with the support of mentors and role models. Being a good team player and understanding the broader organizational goals—such as balancing revenue growth with cost management—are essential for advancement. Expanding beyond specialized roles, like finance, into areas such as general management or marketing can also open pathways to leadership. In conclusion, while the glass ceiling remains a significant barrier in today's workplaces, determination, skill development, and strategic career planning can help individuals overcome these invisible obstacles and achieve higher positions.

10. Cracking the Glass Ceiling:

Although many continue to insist that the glass ceiling is a real barrier for women and minorities in accessing male-dominated positions in business, others challenge that assertion. They say that the glass ceiling continues to exist primarily because of choices made by women regarding the time they spend on their families that, in the end, limits the time they need to advance in their careers. The cumulative effect of time off for child bearing and child rearing is blamed for women facing lower wages and delayed advancement to the highest positions. 2 Contrary to claims of continuing inequality or discrimination, critics of the glass ceiling concept place the blame for the underrepresentation of women in particular, and of minorities by association, on the individuals themselves and on considerations other than structural or institutional inequality.

Nevertheless, industries such as the investment world have suffered criticism about past sexism, with legal judgments levied against Morgan Stanley and Merrill Lynch for practices deemed to be discriminatory. Recently, the investment industry has made inroads into the recruitment and training of women for top positions in their firms to address their past misdeeds. Changes are slow, however; although women currently represent 33% of the best in the bank analyst classes of business schools, only 25% of newly hired associates in this same industry are women. Only 14% of the top executives in the banking industry are women, and in 2005 one report showed that women make 77 cents for every dollar men make. However, many say that improvement, no matter how small, shows that there are cracks developing in the glass ceiling.

11. Landmarks in Cracking the Glass Ceiling:

In 2004, it was estimated that in the United States, women earned 77 cents for every dollar men earn. Although this is a slight increase from 74 cents during the mid-1990s and is up from 68 cents during the late 1980s, these numbers remain troubling to many proponents of equal rights and equal opportunities. Women and minorities are making inroads into higher echelons of the business world, but their salaries still lag behind those of their male counterparts. Although the overall picture remains discouraging, there are clear examples of individuals who have beaten the odds and made the glass ceiling seem permeable.

In 1962, Harvey C. Russell became the first Black vice president of a Fortune 500 company, PepsiCo. During this very volatile time in U.S. history, the promotion of an African American was very controversial, prompting the Ku Klux Klan to attempt to organize a boycott using handbills informing customers that buying Pepsi products would make Black people rich. PepsiCo has continued to be instrumental in lowering the barriers throughout its history by featuring minorities in their advertising and by not hindering their advancement up the corporate ladder. A recent example was the hiring of Indra Nooyi, the eleventh woman to ascend to the top leadership position in a Fortune 500 company.

Although women in upper management are becoming more visible, they still account for less than 17% of all corporate officer jobs, with women of color accounting for less than 2% of that number. Some notable examples of those pioneers are Carleton Fiorina, who in 1999 became the first female chief executive officer (CEO) of a Fortune 500 company, Hewlett-Packard. Her tenure ended amid controversy in 2006, but her appointment seemed to widen the crack in the glass ceiling that had kept women from the top jobs. Just during the past couple of years, Irene Rosenfeld took over the helm of Kraft Foods and Patricia Woertz became CEO of Archer Daniels-Midland. Consistently at the top of the Forbes 400 list of richest Americans are those who have moved beyond the barriers whether they be in place due to gender or race. Oprah Winfrey is a self-made success story who not only has moved beyond the glass ceiling of gender and race but also has taken countless others with her. Although women and minorities are still struggling for parity among their primarily White male counterparts, there are definitely examples that challenge the idea that these discriminatory practices are enmeshed in corporate culture.

12. Data Analysis and Discussion:

The results indicate that 53% of the respondents were males and 47% were females. 86% are married and 14% single. 48% of the respondents are aged between30-39, 44% between 40-49, and 8% were above 50 years of age. As regards education, 14% of the respondents have the O/L certificate, 22% of the respondents have the OND diploma, and 42% of them have first Degrees, while 22% had post graduate degrees. 46% of them are junior executives, 32% are senior Executives, 15.5% were managers and only 6.5% senior managers. 24% of them have between 1-5 years working experience, 35% of the respondents have between 6-10 years working experience, 28% of the respondents have between 11-15 years working experience, and 15% of the respondents have above 15 years working experience

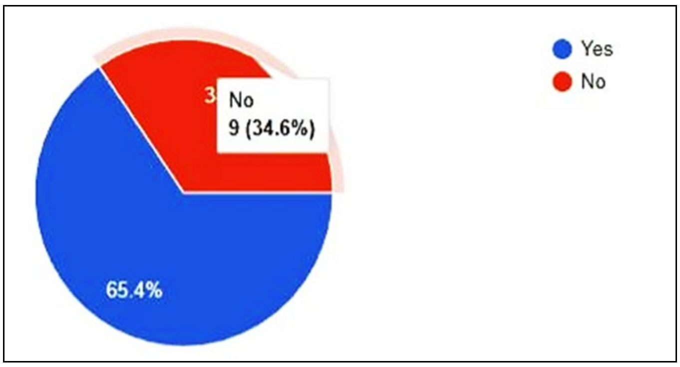
13. Testing of Hypothesis

H1: There is a significant relationship between the glass ceiling effect and women's career advancement in organizations.

H2: The adoption of feminist perspectives in Human Resource Management significantly reduces the impact of the glass ceiling effect in organizations

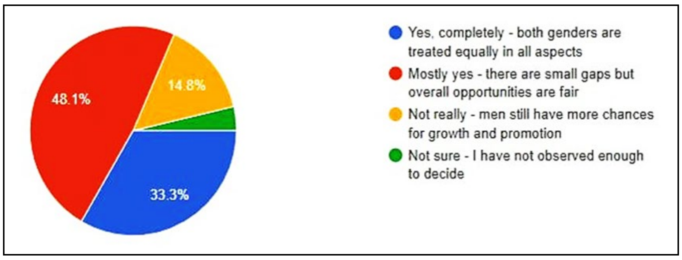
14. Non Doctrinal Research:

i). Have you observed the "glass ceiling" effect in your workplace?



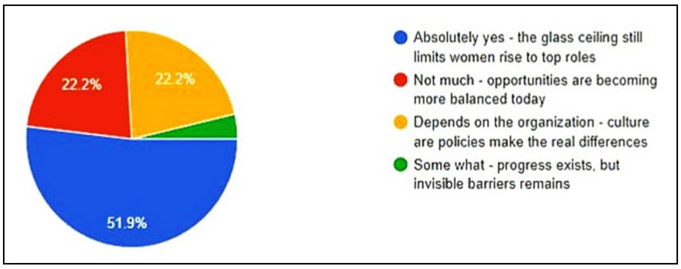
Interpretation: 65.4% (17 respondents) answered "Yes", indicating that a majority have observed the existence of a glass ceiling — meaning they perceive barriers that prevent women or minorities from advancing to higher positions despite their qualifications. 34.6% (9 respondents) answered "No", showing that a smaller portion of participants believe there is no such limitation in their workplace.

ii). Do you believe men and women are given equal opportunity in your workplace?



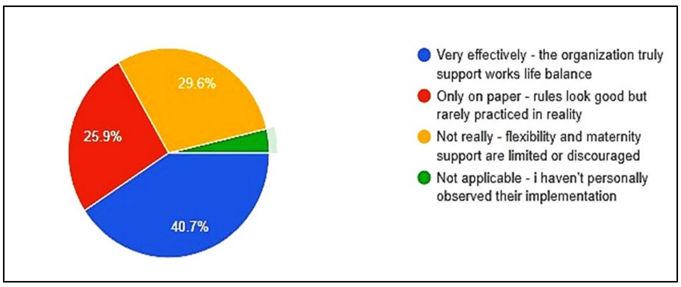
Interpretation: 48.1% (red) responded "Mostly yes", indicating that while workplaces appear generally fair, some minor gender gaps still exist.33.3% (blue) said "Yes, completely", suggesting that around one-third of respondents see full gender equality in opportunities and treatment.14.8% (orange) answered "Not really", meaning they feel men still enjoy more chances for growth and promotion.3.7% (green) were "Not sure", implying limited observation or awareness of workplace dynamics.

iii). Do you think women face more challenges than man in reaching leadership positions?



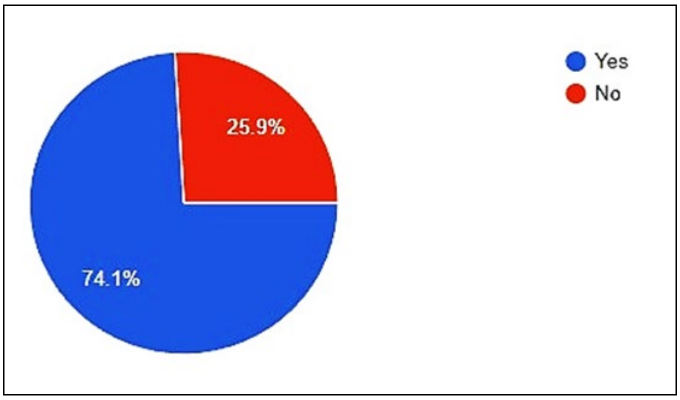
Interpretation: 51.9% (blue) answered "Absolutely yes", indicating that over half of the respondents believe the glass ceiling still restricts women's advancement to top leadership roles.22.2% (red) said "Not much", suggesting that they feel opportunities are becoming more balanced between genders.22.2% (orange) responded "Depends on the organization", showing that workplace culture and policies significantly influence gender equality in leadership opportunities.3.7% (green) chose "Somewhat", acknowledging progress but noting that invisible barriers still persist.

iv). Are flexible working hours and maternity leave policies effectively implemented in your workplace?



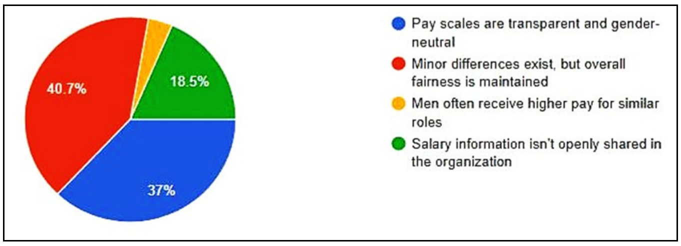
Interpretation: The largest segment (blue, 40.7%) indicates that many believe the organization truly supports work-life balance through these policies. However, a significant portion (red, 25.9%) feels that while policies exist on paper, they are rarely put into practice, and an additional segment (orange, 25.9%) states that flexibility and support are actually limited or discouraged. A small minority (green, 7.4%) report they have not personally observed the implementation of these policies.

v). Have you ever experienced or witnessed workplace discrimination based on gender



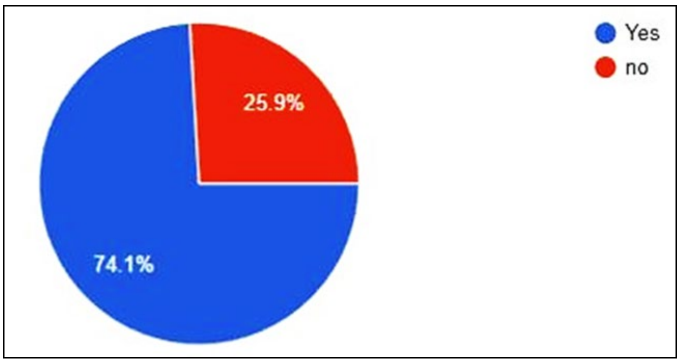
Interpretation: 74.1% of respondents said they have not experienced or witnessed gender-based discrimination, while 25.9% said they have. This suggests that most workplaces are relatively gender-fair, but there are still cases of discrimination that need attention.

vi). Is equal pay for equal work maintained between male and female employees?



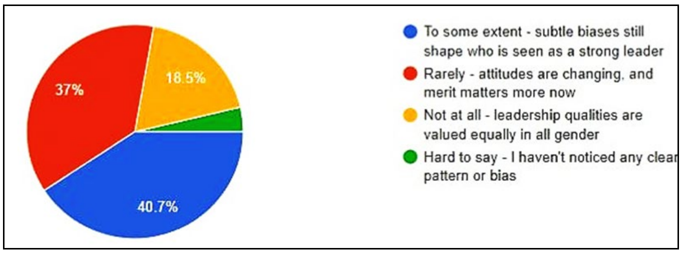
Interpretation: 37% of respondents believe pay scales are transparent and gender-neutral, whereas 40.7% feel that men often receive higher pay for similar roles. 18.5% reported minor differences but overall fairness. Hence, pay equality is partially maintained, but gender pay gaps still persist.

vii). Do HR Manager play a proactive role in promoting gender equality?



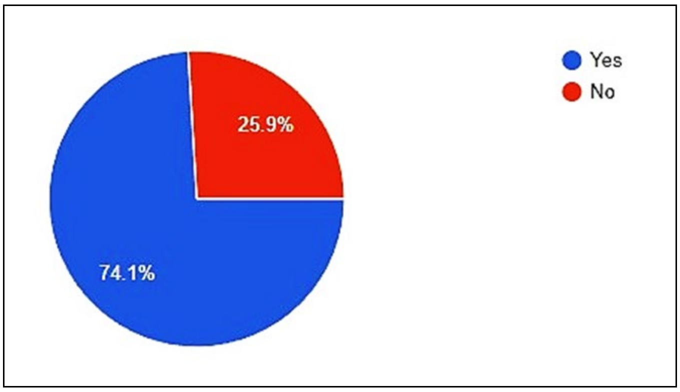
Interpretation: The inference from the survey result is that a significant majority of respondents (74.1%) believe HR Managers play a proactive role in promoting gender equality, while only 25.9% do not share this view. This indicates strong confidence in HR Managers' efforts towards fostering gender equality in the workplace.

viii). Do you think gender stereotypes influence leadership perceptions in your organization?



Interpretation: The inference from the chart is that most respondents (40.7%) believe gender stereotypes continue to influence leadership perceptions in their organization to some extent, with subtle biases still affecting who is viewed as a strong leader. Additionally, 37% feel that such stereotypes rarely influence perceptions, noting that attitudes are changing and merit is gaining importance. This indicates that while progress is being made, the impact of gender stereotypes on leadership perceptions has not been entirely eliminated.

ix). Have you ever notice gender bias in recruitment or selection process?



Interpretation: 74% of the respondents have been noticed gender bias in selection process. 26% of the respondents have been never noticed gender bias in recruitment process.

15. Finding:

Glass Ceiling Effect in HR Management

- The glass ceiling continues to act as a substantial barrier to women's advancement in HR and other organizational hierarchies, resulting in reduced job satisfaction, job engagement, and increased intention to quit among affected female employees.
- Differential treatment based on situational, interpersonal, and organizational gender culture mediates outcomes such as job strain, engagement, satisfaction, and turnover intent, highlighting how organizational culture and biases perpetuate the glass ceiling.
- While HR is a field with high female representation, moving from high-level HR roles to top executive positions (CEO, etc.) is still difficult for women, showing the persistence of a "new glass ceiling" even within

feminized professions.
- Feminist research underscores that traditional HR management often incorporates societal biases, limits women's leadership opportunities, and tends to undervalue women's genuine leadership qualities, particularly outside stereotypically feminine roles.

16. Suggestion
- Addressing the Glass Ceiling and Integrating Feminist Perspectives in HR
- HR must proactively design and implement diversity and inclusion policies, focusing on dismantling structural barriers and fostering truly equitable opportunity for career progression.
- Leadership commitment to diversity must be visible, with regular evaluation of promotion transparency, bias in hiring, and pay equity.
- Training programs for all staff, especially hiring managers, should cover unconscious bias, inclusive leadership, and actively challenge gender stereotypes.
- Establish mentorship and sponsorship schemes to help women and minorities progress to higher leadership roles, supported by clear targets and accountability for diversity outcomes.
- Adopt a feminist perspective in HR by critically evaluating and changing merit definitions, job requirements, and leadership evaluation criteria, emphasizing equal value for diverse leadership styles and acknowledging gendered differences in work-life experience.
- Create and support employee resource groups (ERGs) focusing on gender equity and feminist advocacy, helping to amplify diverse voices in policy development and culture change.
- These findings underscore the need for HR management to move beyond token diversity measures and address systemic inequities with both data-driven and feminist-informed strategies for true leadership equality.

17. Results and Discussion
The 2025 findings on women surpassing the glass ceiling reveal a mix of progress and persistent inequality worldwide. According to The Economist's Glass-Ceiling Index, women's participation in the labor force has risen to 66.6% across OECD countries, with Sweden, Iceland, and Finland leading due to policies that ensure equitable parental leave, childcare support, and strong representation in leadership roles. France, Spain, and Australia also rank among the top performers, showing measurable progress in corporate board representation—now averaging 33%—and equal pay measures. Despite these gains, significant challenges remain: globally, women still earn only about 80.9 cents for every dollar earned by men, and their ascent to senior management is often hindered by structural and cultural barriers in traditional workplaces. The data suggest that progress is uneven—Nordic nations continue to outperform most others, while countries like South Korea and Japan still rank near the bottom due to rigid gender norms and limited workplace flexibility. Overall, while cracks in the glass ceiling are evident, experts agree that systemic changes in corporate culture, legislation, and family support structures are critical for sustaining gender equity advancements.

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