

IS GLASS CEILING A CULTURALLY BOUNDED PHENOMENON? EVIDENCE FROM A NON-WESTERN SETTING

*Melien Wu, Dept. of Business Administration, Chung-Yuan Christian University, 200 Chung-Bei Road,
Pu-Jen Li, Chung-Li City, Taiwan 320, 886-3-2655115, E-mail: melien@ms10.hinet.net*

ABSTRACT

While over 92 percent of executive women report the existence of glass ceiling in America, what is this statistics in Taiwan? Is glass ceiling a worldwide phenomenon, or just a culturally bounded perception? The purposes of this study were: (1) to survey the perception of promotion barriers of managerial women in Taiwan; and (2) to examine the moderating effects of locus of control on the relationship between glass ceiling and job satisfaction. Results from the analyses were: (1) women perceive relatively low degree of glass ceiling, (2) glass ceiling perception is negatively related to job satisfaction, and (3) locus of control as a moderator of the above relationship. The findings suggest that glass ceiling is a subject concept and likely, a culturally bounded phenomenon.

INTRODUCTION

The overt and subtle barriers to advancement faced by women were referred as “glass ceiling.” Today, business organizations are struggling to hold on to their best and brightest women, yet, the persistence of the glass ceiling makes this difficult. Although many expected this barrier to be obliterated with the large influx of women entering the work force over the last two decades, little change has actually occurred in the most senior ranks. Women accounted for only 15 percent of the managerial positions in corporate Taiwan [1]. Another study [2] further indicated that the expectancy of career advancement for female employees is only 39.9%, which is way below that of male’s 83.6%. As such, career women in Taiwan face gender-related barriers to advancement as well as those in the United States.

While over 92 percent of executive women report the existence of glass ceiling in America [3], what is this statistics in Taiwan? Is glass ceiling a worldwide phenomenon, or is it just a culturally bounded perception? In view of literatures about glass ceiling in Taiwan, the systematic research has just emerged. Therefore, the overall purposes of this study were: (1). To survey the perception of promotion barriers of women in management position in Taiwan; and (2) To examine the moderating effect of internal control on the relationship between glass ceiling perception and job satisfaction.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

The generic term of glass ceiling can be divided into objective and subjective forms. The above-mentioned statistics of women in high rank position in both countries refers to the objective form of promotional roadblocks for women [4]. Subjective form of glass ceiling is theoretically more complex. It refers to employee’s evaluation of women’s limited opportunities for advancement with reference to self-defined standards, age/career stage, aspirations and opinions of significant others. More specifically, it incorporates perceptions of intrinsic (e.g. work-role, interpersonal success) and extrinsic success (financial, hierarchical success) with respect to achievement and advancement. Glass ceiling has also been postulated to incorporate individual perception of limited opportunities for promotion not only in one’s present organization, but also in one’s wider career [5][6].

Thus, in the present research glass ceiling effect is conceptualized as perceived barriers in both one's job and one's career.

As mentioned, glass ceiling is characterized by the way in which the individual perceives her promotion opportunities or barriers, and influenced by the views of societal norms and specific culture. Therefore, we can argue that there is a theoretical need to examine glass ceiling as an important concept that reflects the personal perceptions and self-defined standards of the individual in a non-western setting, that is, Taiwan, in this study. The past research of glass ceiling has been informative in terms of antecedents of this phenomenon and strategies of breaking it [7]. However, these research has not controlled for important potentially confounding variables, specifically, individual's psychological characteristics. This research proposed two research questions and two hypotheses:

Question 1: What are female managers' perceptions of glass ceiling in Taiwan?

Question 2: What prevents women from advancing to corporate leadership in Taiwan?

Hypothesis 1: Those who perceive higher degree of glass ceiling will report lower job satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2: Locus of Control of participants will moderate the above-mentioned relationship.

SAMPLE AND INSTRUMENTS

The Registry of Members from the Chinese Management Association and an alumni list of EMBA graduates from four universities are used as the sample for this study. We randomly select 624 women who hold titles of general or departmental managers from both lists. A stamped, return envelope and cover letter were attached to each questionnaire. Two hundred and eighty-nine responses were received. By eliminating surveys containing missing data, the final sample was reduced to 273 responses, resulting in a 43.75% effective response rate. The mean age of the 273 respondents was 37.51 (S.D. =7.47), ranging from 25 to 54 years of age. Of the 273 participants, 110 (40.29%) had obtained at least a 4-year college degree; average organization tenure was 13.16 years (SD=7.02). One hundred and six women (38.8%) referred themselves as middle to upper managers, 167 as lower managers.

We used three measures in this study: glass ceiling perception [8], job satisfaction [9], and locus of control [10]. The coefficient alphas for the three measures in the present study were above 0.70.

RESULTS

For the two research questions proposed, we asked two questions in the survey: (1) in your opinion, has there ever been a promotion decision based on gender in your organization? (2) What prevents you, a female manager, from advancing to corporate leadership?" For the second question, we presented the participants with 10 possible barriers to advancement based on Ragin's list [7], and asked them to select the three most significant factors. We add an item of "family responsibility" as the 11th factor.

The findings were both startling and revealing. Survey responses were sharply different from those conducted in the United States [7]. Over 64% (175) of participants answered the first question as either "No" or "Gender accounts only a little part of the decision." Only 27 (9.8%) women gave a definite answer of "Yes." One hundred and fifty one participants (55.3%) point to the family responsibility as the most crucial barrier holding them back in the corporate ladder. The second and the third factors were the lack of significant general management or line experience and the exclusion from informal networks, of which were number one and two factors in Ragin's study.

Hypotheses were tested using multiple regression analysis and results were shown in table 1. Controlling for demographic variables, perception of glass ceiling accounted for significant variance in job satisfaction, thereby supporting hypothesis 1. By adding internal control in the model, the interaction term of internal control and glass ceiling was significantly and negatively related with job satisfaction. Hypothesis 2 was therefore supported.

Table 1 multiple Regression Analyses of Glass Ceiling, Job Satisfaction, and Locus of Control

Variables	Job Satisfaction (Hyp. 1) β	Job Satisfaction (Hyp.2) β
Age	0.20*	0.18
Tenure	0.13	0.15
Position	0.29**	0.27**
Glass Ceiling	-0.38**	-0.41**
Locus of Control		0.24*
Glass Ceiling * Control		-0.27**
R-SQR (Adj-R-SQR)	0.371 (0.334)	0.447(0.404)
F	10.026***	13.199***

n=237, *p 0.1 **p 0.05 ***p 0.01

DISCUSSION

The unique contribution of this study is to survey the glass ceiling perception of female managers and to examine the moderating effect of internal control on the relationship between glass ceiling perception and job satisfaction in a non-western setting, i.e. Taiwan. Women in the U.S. identify the lack of managerial experience as the most crucial barrier holding them back from their organization advancement, yet, women in Taiwan pointed to the family responsibility as the number one factor. Women in Taiwan seem to hold a more traditional view of women's roles of life, which is to stay home and to care for the house and the children. In a culture that is still focused on the Confucianism teaching, it is easy to understand why the concept of glass ceiling contains different construct in Taiwan than those in western culture. Can the findings be generalized to the other non-western settings? It deserves more future studies.

The study further supports the relationship between glass ceiling and job satisfaction, and the moderating effect of internal control. The finding also suggests that glass ceiling is a subject concept and more likely a culturally bounded phenomenon. It is vital for corporate leaders in Taiwan to have an accurate and complete understanding of the advancement barriers faced by their female employees. Therefore, the study suggests that future study can be conducted to explore the content and construct of the glass ceiling concept in Taiwan. Furthermore, business organizations need to make an immediate effort to ease the dual burden of work and families for women at work, and this can be done by increasing the amount of control that employees have over work and family demands.