Barriers Contributing to Under-Representation of Women in High-level Decision-making Roles across Selected Countries

Xiaoxue Xiang
Western Kentucky University

Jay Ingram, MA
Western Kentucky University

Joseph Cangemi, EdD
Emeritus Professor of Psychology, Western Kentucky University

Abstract

The term glass ceiling, coined in 1986, remains representative of the barriers faced by women who aspire to senior management positions. Women at that time were rarely promoted to top-level positions in most government departments, corporations, educational systems, and other organizations. Since that time, various laws have been established with the intention of creating equality in a legal sense; yet, in most countries worldwide, these laws have not translated to gender equality in the work place.

In the past, both external and internal factors influencing women’s under-representation in leadership positions seldom have been a focus by academic researchers. However, in recent years, the subject has received greater attention, and this article will examine factors still present in barriers women face in the workplace in various countries.
countries. He is author, editor and co-editor of 17 books and more than 300 articles published in a variety of publications, including many in foreign journals. Holder of two honorary doctorates – including one sponsored by the Russian Academy of Sciences – he was the first editor of the Organization Development Journal, serving from 1983 to 1988.

**Keywords:** leadership/management, visible/invisible barriers, inequality, sheng nv

----------

**Contact Information:**

**Xiaoxue Xiang**

Western Kentucky University  
USA  

**Email:** xiaoxue.xiang752@topper.wku.edu

**Jay Ingram, MA**

Western Kentucky University  
College of Education and Behavioral Sciences  
Bowling Green KY 42101  
USA  

**Email:** jayingram@gmail.com

**Joseph P. Cangemi, EdD**

**Cell:** 270 991-3740  
**Fax:** 270-842-0432  

Emeritus Professor of Psychology and Scholar-In-Residence  
Western Kentucky University  
USA  

**Email:** joseph.cangemi@wku.edu
Leadership

Since the concept of leadership was raised, the number of definitions of leadership has continually increased. For example, leadership often is described as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of other individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2012, p.5). According to Northouse (2012), there are several necessary factors to successful leadership, including: personal influence, the desire to attain common goals, and the ability to achieve successful team effort.

“Leadership and management share some components that must be present when working with individuals or groups to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2012, p.5). Leaders are responsible for offering a vision and for clarifying long-term goals. They usually influence and empower subordinates to work collectively toward achieving those goals. Managers are responsible for accomplishing the vision and long-term goals of leaders. Their duties are more detailed and position-oriented than those of leaders.

Definitions of leaders and managers are frequently used interchangeably; however, the differences between the two are noticeable in practice. The functional definition of a manager is one whose focus is on the system, controlling others, and solving short-term issues, whereas a leader is focused on emotional connections with people, creativity, and a vision of long-term goals (Reynolds & Warfield, 2009). To further elucidate the functional differences between a manager and leader, Zaleznik (2004) indicated leaders use power to influence the actions and thoughts of people, whereas a manager uses his or her power to control the actions of others.

Currently, both men and women can serve as leaders and managers if they possess leadership or managerial abilities and are able to effectively execute both skills. Unfortunately, although a person’s gender does not define leadership, the proportion of male and female leaders remains critically imbalanced. Usually, women are exposed to innumerable visible or invisible barriers while seeking high-level positions in organizations (Cangemi, Kowlaski, & Khan, 1998; Payne, 2001; Cangemi, Kowalski, Miller & Hollopeter, 2005).

Women And Leadership

The term glass ceiling describes the phenomenon where women are less present as one looks up at an organizational hierarchy. People have also used this term to reference the obstacles women usually face when pursuing high-level decision-making positions. According to Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia, and Vanneman (2001), glass-ceiling represents once invisible barriers to women’s ascension to top positions. Northouse (2012) stated glass ceiling refers to the barrier that keeps women
from ascending to decision-making positions, which is termed a *labyrinth*. Much of the past research on gender inequality has demonstrated the proportion of women in upper levels of organizations is less than that of men (Blau, Brinton, & Grunsky, 2006; Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 1998). Recent research has continued to reveal organizations, with few exceptions, have continuously engaged in internal promotion biases against women (Fernandez & Campero, 2017).

The term *glass wall* also is applied to describe the obstruction women face frequently in the workplace. Galloway (2012) posited the *glass wall* is an obstacle women must handle when they desire to move laterally within an organization, or to another organization. In fact, the *glass wall* could be considered a catalyst that further cultivates men’s success within the realm of business. According to Browne and Giampere-Meyer (2003), “The metaphor of a *glass wall* relates to the concept of occupational segregation that prevents female employees from seeking the kinds of jobs that lead to promotions” (p. 13). The *glass wall* also can be seen as an epitome whenever employers or managers assign women to “female-appropriate” jobs. Women usually experience the *glass wall* when their employers or managers refuse to expand their job opportunities and promotions.

The term *glass cliff* describes another kind of obstruction women usually face in organizations: “Women are promoted to high-level positions, but these positions involve greater risk and a greater chance of failure” (Galloway, 2012, p. 55). For example, a capable woman is promoted to the CEO of a venture capital company. The company makes a bad investment, the monetary value of the company declines, placing the female CEO at a higher risk of failure than if she is the principal of an elementary school.

A more recent term, *The Glass Escalator*, was introduced by author Christine L. Williams in 2003, and “revisited” in 2013 by Williams after the concept had taken hold in the United States when men began entering the so-called women’s professions (nursing, teaching, librarianship and social work). The *glass escalator* effect describes the differences in upward advancement between men and women in the workplace, especially in those professions traditionally female-dominated. Following the long-held assumption men were better suited for leadership positions, men began passing women “on the way up,” as one is able to do on an escalator, therefore receiving promotions and raises more quickly. Sociologists view this as an additional obstacle for women who had already experienced the *glass ceiling* in male-dominated professions (2013).
Women Leadership in the U.S.A. and other Countries

The glass wall, glass ceiling, glass cliff, and glass escalator refer not only to the barriers women face in one region, but also globally. In 2005 in the United States, 46 percent of the total labor force was made up of women; however, only 16.4 percent of Fortune 500 corporate top level positions were held by women in that year (Sluder, 2007). With this data, it appears women are under-represented in leadership positions.

Higher Education

According to Gallant (2014), the under-representation of women in higher education leadership is not regional but a persistent global phenomenon. At the end of the 20th century, while many countries recognized gender inequality in higher education, the situation had not effectively improved. The highest percentage of women’s representation at the professoriate level does not exceed 17% in UK, Ireland, United States, Australia, Finland, and New Zealand (Gallant, 2014). Moreover, in Ireland, the gender under-representation in higher education is especially prevalent. Fewer than 5% of full-professors are female. Besides that, 16.1% of the Australian professoriate is female, and it has been estimated only 11% of full professors are women (White, 2003, p. 48).

Research conducted by Heijstra, Bjarnason, and Rafnasdottir (2015) surveyed an academic population in Iceland (N=429) and regression analysis found men were “1.8 times more likely than women to be at the rank of full professor” (p. 224). When the variable of family-related decisions were added, men were still found to hold full professor status 1.7 times more than women, despite both genders having similar years of work experience and similar ages.

One of the major factors influencing gender inequality is gender-stereotyping, such as underrating female leaders’ abilities when comparing them with the abilities of male leaders (Gallant, 2014). Fobbs (1988) discussed the barriers and biases American women often suffered when pursuing leadership positions in higher education. For example, in 1985, the number of female presidents in higher education was fewer than 10%, according to the American Council of Education (Fobbs, 1988). Although there were roles and identification models female candidates could take as consultants in higher education, there were fewer female models in the higher education leadership area to encourage further female emulation (Fobbs, 1988).

According to Fobbs (1988), women were treated with bias even though they had the same knowledge and ability as men. For example, women were very likely to be assigned to assistant
or associate positions instead of director. In addition, women often were assigned to programs associated with “women’s work.” For example, women were more likely to be appointed as directors of nursing or social work programs rather than business or engineering programs. Horner (1969) added, “Women consciously or unconsciously expect to have a relatively subordinate status in our society” (Fobbs, 1988, p.4). In other words, “America’s sex-role ideology” (p.4) affected the cultivation of women’s identity. Women were limited to stereotyped roles the traditional culture assigned them, such as virtuous wife and loving mother. In this case, women were expected to be capable of cooking, taking care of children, and/or doing housework. Few would expect women to be independent, confident, and courageous leaders, including in higher education in the United States.

Female Bias in the United States of America

Another barrier for women in achieving administrative leadership positions was the contempt women often received from men. In the male-dominated world, women rarely were encouraged to compete for administrative leadership positions since their abilities were usually ignored (Fobbs, 1988). Thus, the paradox between work and family, which most female leaders have faced, actually reflects the paradox between the traditional roles of women and their desire for self-fulfillment. More recently, as women have developed skills in traditional male positions, such as jobs in the tech industry, there has been evidence of possible contempt as well as an internal promotion bias for women. Fernandez and Campero (2017) examined the hiring practices of over 400 technology organizations and found female applicants were much more likely to be sorted into lower-level job queues compared to male applicants. As a result, women have a much more difficult path to reach higher levels of leadership positions.

Although the number of female leaders has increased, gender inequity in high decision-making levels still exists. Acker (2006) stated the number of top male leaders dramatically exceeded the number of top female leaders in the United States. In other words, as of 2006, women were still under-represented in high-level leadership positions in American corporations. Although the dilemma that female leaders frequently experienced has improved significantly in recent years, there still is a long way to go. According to Northouse (2012), “women earn 57% of bachelor degrees, 60% of masters degrees, more than half of doctorate degrees, nearly half of the first professional degrees awarded in the United States, and make up nearly half of the U.S. labor force” (p. 352). However, women are still under-represented in the upper level of America’s corporations and the political system.
According to Catalyst (2011), “women represent less than 3% of Fortune 500 CEOs, hold only 15.7% of Fortune 500 board seats, and a mere 14.4% of Fortune 500 executive office positions” (Northouse, 2012, p. 352).

According to Carnes, Morrissey, and Geller (2008), in 2005 the participation of women in medicine had a rapid increase; “forty nine percent of medical school students and 42% of residents were women. Women represent 17% of tenured professors, 16% of full professors, 10% of department chairs, and 11% of medical school deans in the United States” (Carnes et al., 2008, p. 145). However, women were more likely to be assigned to positions of clinicians and educators—tasks referred to as “institutional housekeeping” (Carnes et al., 2008, p. 145). In sum, the core of gender inequity lies in traditional culture and social norms, which are neither formed nor reformed in a short time. Thus, there is not a shortcut to resolution.

**Female Bias in Europe**

The current trend of female leadership in Europe is similar to that in the United States of America. Leyenaar (2008) found the proportion of European women leaders has increased 30% compared to the 1960s, but this increase has been stagnant since 2007. Compared with other countries, European women occupy a greater proportion of positions in the political sphere (Leyenaar, 2008):

In 2008, in the twenty-seven European Union (EU) member states, there were two women presidents in office, in Finland and Ireland, and one woman prime minister in Germany. Three governments, however, had 40-50 per cent women ministers in Finland, Sweden, and Spain, while eight governments had more than 30 per cent women ministers (including Denmark, Germany, France, Austria, and the United Kingdom), and in the European Parliament—30 per cent (Leyenaar, 2008, p.1).

The percentage of women in legislative divisions and in governments had never been that high before 2008. However, it did not mean equal gender representation was approaching. According to Leyenaar (2008), equal gender representation could not be achieved readily since there were still various factors affecting women’s leadership in the European political arena in the 21st century. Although the numbers of highly educated, wealthy, and experienced women had increased in Europe, *it had not essentially altered the power relationships between men and women* (Leyenaar, 2008).

**Mexico**

Mexican women also encounter barriers that limit their choices in leadership positions. According to Kerevel and Atkeson (2015), the major obstruction modern Mexican women need
to deal with is gender stereotyping, especially in politics. Currently, the presence of women political leaders has increased. For example, “In Mexico’s Chamber of Deputies, nearly 38% of seats were held by women in the 2012-2015 term, a large increase from the 16% of seats held by women in 2000, prior to the passage of mandatory quotas (Kerevel & Atkeson, 2015, p. 734). However, the increasing number of Mexican female political leaders barely alters gender stereotyping as to political leadership in that country. The main reason why women cannot overcome men’s dominant role in Mexican politics is the lack of female executives there (Kerevel & Atkeson, 2015). For instance, unlike other Latin American countries, Mexico has had no female presidents. Moreover, currently, there are no female governors in any of Mexico’s states. “At the local level, women have been severely underrepresented in mayoral offices and other executive-level positions (Kerevel & Atkeson, 2015, p.735).

**Australia and New Zealand**

According to Simms (2008), gender stereotyping is the top barrier preventing Australian and New Zealand women from pursuing high-level decision-making positions in the political sphere. In Australia and New Zealand, people still regard males as natural leaders. Women’s abilities are evaluated through their family roles—“wives” and “mothers” (Simms, 2008).

Women in Australia often have encountered gender inequity in the workplace, especially at the higher levels. According to Chesterman, Ross-Smith, and Peters (2003), although the number of women in senior academic leadership had increased somewhat, women still were facing gender inequity and gender discrimination. First, women still were a rarity in upper level academic leadership positions compared with men; second, some men, when being interviewed, expressed opinions about women leadership in statements such as “over consultation and slow decision-making are typical of women’s leadership style” (Chesterman et al., 2003, p. 432). Third, women usually felt insecure while pursuing leadership roles, even though they knew they were fully qualified for the positions they sought. “The main reason they felt insecure was the deeply engendered assumptions that still prevail in organizations, possibly because women sense they are not legitimately in senior positions and must be careful and cautious” (p. 433). Also adding to their sense of insecurity, Australian women in the workplace found even though they ask for raises about as often as men, men are 25% more likely to receive a raise (*The Week, September 16*).

Gender inequity in Australia continued in 2008 in the senior academic area, as well as the political field. According to Simms (2008), leaders in the public political arena were required
to possess several certain gender-coded leadership traits in order to be considered good or successful leaders. Traditionally, politics has been a gendered occupation. In Australia and New Zealand, party leaders often were viewed as the fathers of the nation. According to Simms (2008), barriers to women’s political achievement in those two countries ascertained the biggest barrier as *gender stereotyping*. In Australia and New Zealand, most senior party officials at that time saw the ideal candidate for parliament as “tall, dark and handsome, a good father who attends church” (Sawer & Simms, 1993, p. 66). Rarely were women considered as first-choice candidates.

**China**

Barriers for Asian women are essentially the same. China, the country with the largest population in the world, plays an important role, not only in Asia but also worldwide. According to Burnett (2010), despite the fact Chinese women have had *legal* equality for more than six decades, and despite the Chinese government’s efforts to coordinate with the international community on women’s rights, Chinese women still face gender inequality in various areas.

According to Tsang, Chan, and Zhang (2011), since the late 80’s the Chinese government promulgated a series of policies to ensure women could participate in leadership roles in various levels of governmental agencies and, as a result, the percentage of women leaders in governmental agencies increased. This increase of women in male-dominated industries led to women’s acquisition of some key positions at the national level and in the autonomous regions throughout China. However, women account for only 15% of all government posts across China, and the higher the rank, the lower the scope of women’s representation” (Tsang et al., p. 315). In this case, the policy did not clear all barriers women commonly face in their workplaces.

Tsang et al. (2011) listed several main causes of under-representation of women in leadership. First, Chinese traditional culture has shaped the way the public and society perceive female leaders. Mainstream traditional ideologies such as Confucianism believe the main identity of women is subordinate to their family. In other words, being a filial daughter, loving mother, and virtuous wife is the *major duty of women*.

Today, the general public still considers female leaders as “strong women,” which implies they do not possess some traditional virtues. Some women’s values are assimilated with the perspective of Chinese traditional culture and social norms. Their own beliefs and behaviors contribute to the under-representation of women in the leadership field. Next, the age of Chinese women also is used as a reason to obstruct them from participating
in leadership roles (Tsang et al., 2011). For example, young women are usually considered as inexperienced and unprepared for leadership roles; middle-age women are perceived as “tied down by family demands” (Tsang et al., p. 315). Thus, they cannot fully commit to implementing leadership duties; aged women are considered lacking in stamina to lead” (p. 315). Further, Chinese media encourages women to fulfill their “traditional duties” instead of pursuing leadership responsibilities, describing women leaders as aggressive and intimidating figures and discouraging them from assuming leadership roles. “The male-dominated pattern of an old boys’ network has limited women’s opportunities to cultivate social networks” (p. 316).

As mentioned above, Chinese media is one place where the glass ceiling is overspread. Research in 2001 by the International Women’s Media Foundation (IWMF)—the Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media, examined more than 500 companies in nearly 60 countries, including China. The result of the research showed in the news media industry “73% of the top management jobs are occupied by men, compared with 27% occupied by women. However, among senior professionals, women are nearing parity with 41% of the newsgathering, editing, and writing jobs” (IWMF, 2011). Unfortunately, women’s voices cannot be sufficiently heard since they do not occupy many high-level media positions.

In recent years, a new word has been created and widely used in China: sheng nv—which literally means left women. Sheng nv identifies any woman who is 30 years of age (or older), has a stable career, but is still single (Zhou, 2010). In other words—she is left behind by eligible bachelors. It denies a woman’s autonomy to choose to remain single or to choose her own time to get married.

According to Zhou (2010), the most fundamental reason for coining the term sheng nv is so men can maintain gender discrimination as well as their perceived domination over women. Their efforts are designed to make modern women return to the traditional role of subservience to the male. Unfortunately, many Chinese women have accepted the sheng nv ideology by trying to get married before the age of 30 in order to remove the stigma inherent in the term. Apparently, achieving leadership roles is discouraged and thus is not their primary goal in life.

Japan And South Korea

Japan, another important country in Asia, faces the same problem: the absence of women in leadership roles. Research conducted by Scantlebury et al. (2005) found Japan has a long history of maintaining barriers for women in leadership, specifically in science education. For women entering education, Japan has one of the lowest
male/female ratios at 35% and graduation rates for females are half of that compared to other first world countries. In 1970, Japanese women made up 2.3 percent of undergraduates in science fields and by 2004, this number has remained unchanged (Scantlebury et al., 2005). In the 1990s, there was an effort to increase female enrollment in the sciences through affirmative action programs; however, the opposite has occurred and the percentage of women in the sciences has been reduced. Scantlebury et al. (2005) argued these barriers were due to a lack of mentors for women, as well as the lack of support for women who choose to become mothers. For individuals in the sciences, it is expected they work on average of 70 hours per week and when women take time off for child-rearing obligations, it makes it problematic and sometimes impossible to re-enter their previous status or position (Scantlebury et al., 2005).

According to Homma, Motohashi, and Ohtsbo (2013), in order to increase the percentage of women leaders in the scientific field, the Japanese government adopted various methods to “break down the traditionally male-dominated culture” (Homma et al., 2013, p. 29). However, the consequence is insufficient. According to the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report (2011), in 2013, “The Gender Gap Index of Japan is 98th among 135 countries. The factors resulting in gender inequity in the Japanese scientific area include: the paradox between work and the fulfillment of family duties (e.g., taking care of children), the difficulty of returning to the workforce after a break in a career, and the increased burdens on female scientists caused by work intensity... especially when they have children (Homma et al., 2013, p. 529).

Gender bias causes negative influence in promoting gender equity in the Japanese scientific area. According to Homma et al. (2011), some male scientists evaluate their female colleagues via a subconsciously biased perspective, and some female scientists tend to underestimate themselves.

According to Yasukawa (2013), not only in the scientific realm, but also in the area of Japanese academic medicine, females in leadership positions are a minority. In 2013, among 80 Japanese medical schools, “women constituted only 2.6% of all full-time professors and only 2.5% of 80 deans; 2.5% of 103 women were full-time professors, 49 (48%) had positions in the departments of basic medical sciences” (Yasukawa, 2013, p. 700). Similar to China, the gender bias in Japan stems from Japanese history and culture. The first step toward promoting gender equity in Japan would be through educating the general public with the facts. According to Cho, Kim, Lee, Lim, and Park (2015), the same situation persists in South Korea. Female leaders there are
struggling with this same paradox between work and family responsibilities. *Traditional culture* in China, Japan, and South Korea seems to be the great barrier to women whenever they pursue leadership roles.

**Africa**

The phenomenon of women’s under-representation in the workplace does not exist only in the countries mentioned above, but also in Africa. According to Nkomo and Ngambi (2009), from 1997 to 2007, six of the world’s nine regions experienced increased employment to population ratios. However, sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia, and South Asia experienced declines. Although the number of women who received education and professional training has increased in recent years, and women have made some achievements in entering and advancing in managerial positions of some organizations, men continue worldwide to rule leadership and management positions in various areas. Africa is not an exception.

In the United States, the focus of most academic research on women leadership in Africa is inadequate. According to Nkomo and Ngambi (2009), African women are still under-represented in the workplace despite the dramatic increase of employed women from 1997-2007. A variety of factors keeps African women from pursuing leadership positions. These include culture, social traditions, education, discrimination, gender-stereotyping, etc. For example, in Africa, female children usually would receive some “education” in social tradition; instead of aspiring to be a successful professional female leader, women are encouraged to believe being a good wife and mother should be their only goal. Gender inequality still exists in most countries, even though those countries now have legislation to ensure women can legally enjoy the same status as men. This is true in a variety of occupations, especially high decision-making levels.

**Discussion**

While professional women have enjoyed for some time now their legitimate rights in the workplace, the aforementioned barriers to women in leadership positions will not be eliminated anytime soon (Leyeyaar, 2008). People frequently ask, “What can we do about these barriers?” Although gender inequity in the workplace will not easily be altered, there are still some things that can be done to improve the situation for professional women.

Education should be recognized as a crucial tool to encourage and publicize gender equity while we abandon gender discrimination. Since gender stereotyping and discrimination can be seen as inherent in an individual’s values, it is essential to educate children and adolescents toward more positive, progressive practices in gender-evaluation
and skill assignment. This would result in more leadership opportunities for capable women and a reduction in the number of barriers professional women are forced to face in the workplace.

Leading companies and organizations should set good examples by breaking the glass barriers and offering more leadership and management opportunities to capable women. They could begin by encouraging and promoting women whose skills deserve recognition for bringing pride, loyalty, and harmony to the workplace; for promoting women whose ideas and energy result in greater profits to the company. They could make a studied effort to bring their companies closer to a gender-equal staff where every single employee will have the same opportunities for promotions, management positions, and rewards.

Since far too many people tend to reject change, a good place to start might be with the education of current leaders, officers, and managers in one’s organization so they can assist in “paying it forward” leading others to accept and adapt to the changes that will result in equal opportunities for promotions and equal pay for both men and women. Leaders involved early in proposed changes will feel they are a part of the change rather than outsiders and, hence, victims.

To say the very least, it appears women are an underutilized resource in leadership and in the workforce. Addressing and changing these cultural norms of gender bias could have a positive impact on the world. Scantlebury et al., (2005) argued changing cultural norms starts with how parents raise their children. The attitudes about what is possible for women and men starts at home.

Another important aspect that could begin to loosen the barriers for women are by developing mentoring relationships with individuals in fields previously thought of as male-oriented, such as engineering and technology (Fernandez & Campero, 2017; Scantlebury et al., 2005). Promoting societal and workplace changes leading to success in gender-equality is a “must” for the 21st century. No country can afford to lose the great talent inherent in women throughout the world.
References


