

Shattering the Glass Ceiling: Insights into Women's Pathways to Leadership in Sri Lanka

Herath, H.M.T.S.¹, Surangi, H.A.K.N.S.², Hemsiri, T.N.³

^{1,2,3}Department of Commerce and Financial Management, Faculty of Commerce and Management Studies, University of Kelaniya

¹tish@kln.ac.lk, ²surangins@kln.ac.lk, ³nayanaminit@gmail.com

Abstract

Although much research has been done on the glass ceiling phenomena in recent years, the question remains unsolved because the barriers themselves receive more attention than the ways in which women break through them. This study explores the factors that affected women who tried to break through the ceiling. This research follows a qualitative exploratory research approach. Seven semi-structured interviews with women in top positions in Sri Lanka provided the data for the study. Data were analysed and interpreted using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that three main factors affecting women's career advancement: individual factors like emotional stability and self-confidence, organizational factors like supportive work environments and policies, and cultural factors like attitudes towards Sri Lankan women. The findings offer recommendations for increasing female representation in top positions and suggest future research using a quantitative approach in different Sri Lankan contexts.

Keywords: *Glass ceiling, Top managerial positions, Women career advancement*

Copyright: © 2024 Herath, H.M.T.S., Surangi, H.A.K.N.S. and Hemsiri, T.N. This is an open access distributed under the Creative Common Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Correspondence: tish@kln.ac.lk

ORCID of authors: Herath, H.M.T.S.-  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2671-2212>
Surangi, H.A.K.N.S.-  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2671-2212>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4038/kjm.v13i2.7812>



Introduction

Women play a significant role in a country's economic development and are perceived to have equal rights and obligations to men (Singh, 2019). The participation of women in the labour market holds significant importance due to its multifaceted implications on social, economic, and individual levels. This phenomenon exerts a broad influence on diverse facets of both society and the economy. As a result, the global labour force participation for women among the working-age population has experienced significant growth during the past century (*New Data Shine Light on Gender Gaps in the Labour Market, 2023*). Currently, females are increasingly entering the labour force, but in most countries, males dominate the decision-making positions in organizations (Akpinar, 2012). According to Thornton (2019), only 15% of Chief Executive officer (CEO) positions are held by women, and the proportions of senior roles and management positions held by women are 29% and 25% globally, even though 50% of world graduates are females. This indicates that it is a global phenomenon. Despite the development of many women in the business sector, women continue to face obstacles in their quest for meaningful representation in top management positions in the current period (Sharma & Kaur, 2019).

Nevertheless, the challenges women encounter in achieving top-level executive roles remain widespread (Sharma & Kaur, 2019). Compared to their male counterparts, women tend to be employed in lower-level and lower-cadre leadership (Mohammadkhani and Dariush, 2016). This under-representation of women in managerial positions has been an argued topic discussed in the past decades (Kuruppuarachchi & Surangi, 2020). Empirical studies have identified this situation as 'Glass Ceiling', which states that there are invisible barriers that limit women from reaching high ranks in organizations. The "glass ceiling" refers to

the invisible yet impenetrable barriers that prevent women from reaching the highest levels of leadership and management in organizations despite their qualifications and achievements. It explains a transparent which is glass and an upper barrier which is a ceiling that limits the capability of women to reach the top level of the hierarchy which they can see (Dowling, 2017). In today's world, women's educational levels are higher. However, women are not successful in reaching top-level positions although they attain higher educational qualifications (Singh, 2019). Women outperform men in their extraordinary advancement in educational achievements and attain graduate and post-graduate degrees (Callister, Newell, Perry, & Scott, 2006). However, even with high participation in education and the labour force, women stagnate at some point on their way to top-level positions (Lathabhavan & Balasubramanian, 2017). These barriers are deeply embedded in organizational cultures, societal norms, and institutional practices, making them challenging to identify and dismantle (Morrison, White, & Van Velsor, 1987). This is the concept of Glass Ceiling which was identified in the empirical findings.

The glass ceiling, a gender-based discrimination system, is a significant issue in developing countries. However, significant research gaps exist, notably in context-specific studies, intersectionality, longitudinal research, and policy and intervention efficacy (Krook, 2020). Existing research is mostly focused on Western contexts, creating gaps in understanding the particular issues that women confront in developing countries (Afiouni, Ruël, & Schuler, 2014). Understanding intersectionality and longitudinal research can give a more thorough view of the problem (Sharma & Rastogi, 2019; Williams, Kilanski, & Muller, 2014). Thus, understanding and addressing this phenomenon in developing countries is crucial for several reasons. Gender diversity



in leadership roles is linked to improved organizational performance and economic outcomes. Companies with higher representation of women in top management positions tend to perform better financially and exhibit greater innovation (Hoobler, Masterson, Nkomo, & Michel, 2018). In developing countries, empowering women to overcome the glass ceiling can significantly enhance economic development by leveraging the full potential of the workforce (World Economic Forum, 2021). Addressing the glass ceiling is essential for achieving gender equality and social justice. Women in developing countries often face multiple layers of discrimination based on gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity. Ensuring equal opportunities for women to ascend to leadership positions is a critical step towards rectifying these inequalities and promoting social equity (Jayachandran, 2021). Women in leadership positions serve as role models and can inspire future generations of women to pursue ambitious career goals. This can help challenge and change deep-seated gender stereotypes and cultural norms that limit women's professional aspirations in developing countries (Sahoo & Lenka, 2020).

This situation is very much visible and even critical in Sri Lanka, a developing country in the South Asian region. According to the Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey Annual Report 2020, the labour force participation rate (LFPR) for women was 34.5%, significantly lower than 73% for men. Also, the unemployment rate for women in Sri Lanka was 8.4% in 2020, compared to 3.3% for men. Despite progress in women's education and workforce participation, Sri Lankan women are underrepresented in top leadership roles. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2021, Sri Lanka ranks low in terms of economic participation and opportunity for women, particularly in leadership positions. According to this report, despite higher university enrollment rates for women (61% of total enrollments), their

representation in senior management and leadership roles is only 12.5% in senior and middle management positions and 8.2% in board positions. Also, women hold only 5.3% of seats in the national parliament. This would give rise to a questionable situation of why women fail to reach top-level management positions even though they are qualified in education, which comes under the glass ceiling phenomenon, and many researchers have identified the cause of glass ceilings. Fewer studies, nevertheless, concentrate on people who have climbed to higher positions in their careers, how they did so, and what factors influence glass ceilings. In this setting, even amid such a social phenomenon, some women have still been able to break through the glass ceiling (Chard, 2013). Accordingly, this raises the question: do women involved in top leadership possess unique factors that they influence to shatter the ceiling? Based on this, the research question, 'What are the factors that allow women to break through the ceiling to their current positions in management?' has been developed.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows: the gaps are introduced, and the literature review is presented in the following section. The chosen methodology is then explained in section 3. The results are then given and analyzed in section 4. Section 5 concludes with some final thoughts.

Literature Review

Glass Ceiling

The term "glass ceiling" was first coined in the 1980s by Ann Harrison to describe the invisible yet unbreakable barriers that prevent women from rising to the highest ranks within organizations, despite having the necessary qualifications and capabilities (Morrison, White, & Van Velsor, 1987). This was described as a ceiling as it creates a limitation for women to advance in their



careers, and the limitation is not directly observable. These barriers are often subtle and informal, deeply embedded in organizational cultures and societal norms, making them difficult to identify and dismantle. This phenomenon exhibits several key characteristics. First, **Invisibility**: The glass ceiling is not an overt or explicitly stated barrier but rather an implicit one. It is characterized by the unseen obstacles that women encounter as they climb the corporate ladder (Cotter, Hermesen, Ovadia, & Vanneman, 2001). Second, **Pervasiveness**: This phenomenon is widespread and can be found across various sectors and industries worldwide. It affects women in corporate environments, academia, politics, and other fields (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). Third, **Structural Barriers**: These include organizational practices and policies that disproportionately favor men. Examples include biased promotion criteria, lack of mentorship opportunities, and exclusion from informal networks that are crucial for career advancement (Eagly & Carli, 2007) and Fourth, **Cultural Norms and Gender Stereotypes**: Societal expectations often dictate that women should prioritize family responsibilities over their careers. These cultural norms perpetuate gender stereotypes that view women as less capable or less committed to their professional roles (Ridgeway, 2011).

The glass ceiling has far-reaching implications that affect not only women but also organizations and societies at large. First, it directly impacts women's career advancement and severely violates one's fundamental right to make their own choices. It limits their career growth and professional development (Catalyst, 2020). The lack of visible pathways to advancement can demotivate women, reducing their engagement and commitment to their organizations (Ragins et al., 1998). Consequently, young women may be discouraged from aspiring to leadership roles if they do not see successful female

role models in these positions (Ely et al., 2011). Second, organizations with fewer women in leadership roles miss out on the benefits of diverse perspectives, which have been linked to better decision-making, innovation, and financial performance (Hoobler, Masterson, Nkomo, & Michel, 2018). Companies with greater gender diversity in leadership positions often perform better financially. The glass ceiling can, therefore, negatively impact an organization's bottom line (Noland et al., 2016). Also, women who face persistent barriers are more likely to leave their organizations, leading to higher turnover rates and associated costs (Ragins et al., 1998). As a result, organizations that fail to promote gender equality may suffer reputational damage, affecting their brand and attractiveness to top talent (Gompers & Kovvali, 2018). Third, the struggle against the glass ceiling can lead to frustration, decreased job satisfaction, and higher turnover rates among women. Thus, women who continuously face obstacles in their careers may experience higher levels of stress and burnout, impacting their overall well-being (Martinez et al., 2020). It also perpetuates a cycle where young women lack role models in leadership positions, discouraging them from aspiring to these roles (Schwartz, 1989). Finally, the glass ceiling contributes to lower overall participation of women in the workforce, which can hinder economic growth and development (OECD, 2017). Because societies that do not fully utilize the talents of half their population are less competitive and innovative (World Bank, 2020). Also, the persistence of the glass ceiling perpetuates gender inequality, undermining efforts towards achieving social justice and equitable opportunities for all (Catalyst, 2020; United Nations, 2020). Thus, overcoming the glass ceiling can help shift cultural norms and stereotypes about gender roles, promoting a more inclusive society (Ridgeway, 2011).

Current Stage: From Global and Sri



Lankan Perspectives

Despite advancements in gender equality and diversity initiatives, women remain underrepresented in senior management and executive roles across the globe. Thus, it continues to be a significant barrier for women worldwide, preventing them from reaching top leadership positions in various sectors. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2021, women hold only 27% of managerial positions globally. This statistic highlights a persistent gender gap in leadership roles, despite increasing awareness and efforts to promote gender equality. A report by McKinsey & Company found that women make up just 24% of C-suite positions in North America, with similar trends observed in Europe and Asia (McKinsey & Company, 2022). Women's representation on corporate boards has improved slightly, but significant gaps remain. The MSCI Women on Boards Progress Report 2021 indicates that women hold 22.6% of board seats at companies globally, up from 20% in 2019. However, progress varies widely by region and industry.

North America and Europe have made notable progress in promoting gender diversity in leadership roles. The European Union has implemented various directives aimed at increasing the number of women on corporate boards, resulting in higher representation in several countries (World Economic Forum, 2021). In the United States, women hold 30% of board seats in S&P 500 companies as of 2022, according to Spencer Stuart's Board Index (Spencer Stuart, 2022). The Asia-Pacific region shows mixed results, with some countries making strides in gender diversity while others lag behind. Japan and South Korea, for instance, have relatively low representation of women in leadership roles, whereas Australia and New Zealand have higher percentages of women in senior positions (World Economic Forum, 2021). In the Middle East, cultural and societal norms often present significant

barriers to women's advancement. However, countries like the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have introduced reforms to improve women's participation in the workforce and leadership (World Economic Forum, 2021). In Africa, women's representation in leadership varies widely. South Africa stands out with higher representation of women in corporate boards and political leadership roles, partly due to strong legislative frameworks promoting gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2021).

The glass ceiling remains a pervasive issue in Sri Lanka, shaped by cultural, organizational, and economic factors. Sri Lanka is a country with a majority of women population, representing 51.5% by females (Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka, 2023). As a result, women have a higher enrollment rate in higher education compared to men. For instance, in the 2019- 2020 academic year, women constituted approximately 61% of the total student enrollment in state universities. This high enrollment rate indicates that women are equally, if not more, qualified than men at the tertiary education level (University Grants Commission Sri Lanka, 2021). Consequently, women increasingly enter the workforce with a high level of educational qualifications like in other Asian countries, but women's representation in decision-making positions is comparatively low (Jayathilaka & Uduwela, 2018). However, the labour force participation rate for women is 34.5%, significantly lower than 73% for men, and the unemployment rate for women in Sri Lanka was 8.4% in 2020, compared to 3.3% for men. Despite higher enrollment rates, the transition from higher education to employment, especially in leadership roles, remains challenging for women. Data from the University Grants Commission shows that while women make up the majority of graduates, they are underrepresented in fields traditionally associated with leadership and higher earning potential, such as engineering and technology (University Grants Commission Sri Lanka,



2021). This disparity indicates a significant underrepresentation of women in the workforce (Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka, 2023). Also, women are disproportionately employed in lower-paying and less secure jobs. They are more likely to be found in the informal sector or in occupations traditionally seen as extensions of domestic roles, such as education, health, and social services. Men, on the other hand, dominate higher-paying sectors like construction, transportation, and manufacturing (Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka, 2023).

Compounding the situation, women's representation in leadership positions in Sri Lanka is still significantly lower for them. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2021 by the World Economic Forum, women in Sri Lanka hold only 12.5% of senior and middle management positions. This statistic underscores the significant underrepresentation of women in leadership roles despite their educational qualifications (World Economic Forum, 2021). Data from the Women in Work 2020 report by the International Finance Corporation (IFC) reveals that women occupy only 8.2% of board positions in Sri Lankan publicly listed companies. This low representation in corporate governance highlights the extent of the glass ceiling in the corporate sector (International Finance Corporation, 2020). Not only that, women's representation in political leadership is also limited. As of the 2020 parliamentary elections, women held only 5.3% of seats in the national parliament. This is one of the lowest rates in the region and indicates substantial barriers to women's participation in political decision-making processes (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2020).

Despite some progress, the glass ceiling remains a global challenge, particularly for Sri Lanka. Women continue to face significant barriers to reaching top leadership positions due to cultural, organizational, and economic factors. Addressing these issues requires concerted efforts from governments,

organizations, and society as a whole to promote gender equality and create inclusive environments that support women's career advancement.

Barriers to Women's Career Advancement

Women's career paths are unique to those of men (Mavin S., 2008; O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005). Women do not experience linear career paths because their careers are interrupted by family and household responsibilities (Hopkins, Deborah, Passerelli, & Bilimoria, 2008). According to Abalkhail (2019), female career decisions are influenced by their relationships with their family, co-workers, and clients, and these relationships slow down the career advancement of women. Several research studies have been conducted on Factors affecting Glass Ceiling and women career advancement in both developed and developing countries worldwide. Some factors of the Glass Ceiling are universal and are commonly applied to all countries, but there are some factors of the Glass ceiling which are specific to the institutional and socio-cultural context of the country (Lathabhavan & Balasubramanian, 2017).

According to Bombowela & De Alwis (2013), individual factors are the factors that come from the females themselves which affect their career advancement. Self-confidence, being emotional and positive thinking are some individual factors highlighted in the that study. Datta & Agrawal (2017), in their study on the women career advancement of Indian managers, describe these factors as Intra-personal factors in their study. They describe Intrapersonal factors as personal values and motivations. They identified the desire for autonomy and financial independence as a significant motivator. Further, the study highlighted that Self-confidence is an important factor that affects women's advancement in their

careers, which drives their growth and success.

Many organizations still lack the necessary policies and practices to support women's career advancement. This includes inadequate mentorship programs, biased promotion criteria, and a lack of flexible working arrangements that accommodate work-life balance (Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013). Gendered organizational hierarchy and biased organizational cultures, which prefer a more masculine culture than a balanced culture with both men and women, affect the women in advancing to managerial positions (Datta & Agrawal, 2017; Napasri & Yukongdi, 2015). According to Napasri & Yukongdi (2015), organizational policies and recruitment and promotion practices affect women's careers if they favor women equally as men. Further, Lathabhavan & Balasubramanian (2017) have identified organizational/situational factors that represent the work environment of the women employees. Organizations must have strategies and efforts to identify the unique talents of women employees, give them challenging tasks and give them access to resources and opportunities to develop their skills to help them advance their careers (O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005). Purcell, MacArthur, & Samblanet (2010) identify the organizational methods of recruitment and organizational changes severely affect the career advancement of women.

Persistent cultural norms and gender stereotypes continue to hinder women's progress in many regions. In some cultures, traditional gender roles often dictate that women should prioritize family and household responsibilities over professional careers. This societal expectation can limit women's time and energy for career advancement and deter them from seeking leadership roles (Jayachandran, 2021). Cultural stereotypes about gender roles can also lead to biased perceptions of women's leadership abilities. Women may be viewed as less competent or less suited for leadership

positions compared to men, impacting their chances of being promoted to top managerial roles (Ridgeway, 2011). Similarly, cultural expectations around child-rearing and household duties can lead women to take career breaks or work part-time, impacting their career trajectory and opportunities for advancement (Budig & England, 2001).

Theoretical Perspective

Several theories have been proposed to explain the persistence of the glass ceiling. First, human capital theory. Suggests that differences in education, experience, and skills between men and women can explain the gender disparity in leadership roles. According to this theory, individuals who invest more in their education and professional development are more likely to advance in their careers. However, this theory often fails to account for systemic discrimination that affects women's access to these resources (Becker, 1964). Second, social capital theory. This theory focuses on the networks and relationships that individuals build within their organizations. Men typically have greater access to influential networks that can aid in their career advancement, while women are often excluded from these circles (Ibarra, 1993). Third, structural theory. It argues that organizational structures and cultures are inherently biased against women, creating barriers to their advancement. These biases are often institutionalized in company policies, practices, and norms, creating barriers to women's advancement. This includes practices like gender-biased performance evaluations and promotion processes (Acker, 1990). Fourth, gender role theory. Gender role theory examines how societal norms and expectations about gender roles influence behaviour in the workplace. According to this theory, traditional gender roles dictate that women should prioritize family responsibilities over professional aspirations, leading to less investment in their careers. These societal expectations can result in discriminatory attitudes and



practices in the workplace, such as assumptions that women are less committed to their jobs or less capable of leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Next, intersectionality. This model was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, and this framework examines how overlapping identities (e.g., race, class, gender) interact to create unique experiences of disadvantage for women. Intersectionality highlights that woman of color, for instance, face compounded barriers compared to their white counterparts (Crenshaw, 1991).

These theories provide various lenses through which to understand the persistence of the glass ceiling. Structural and social capital theories highlight organizational and network barriers, while human capital and gender role theories emphasize individual investments and societal expectations. Intersectionality adds a crucial layer by considering how multiple identities intersect to affect women's experiences in the workplace. Together, these theories underscore the complex and multifaceted nature of the barriers women face in advancing to top leadership positions.

Methodology

The authors used Saunders et al. (2016)'s research onion model to build their methodology. This qualitative research is conducted as exploratory research under the social constructivist paradigm. This is because this research has been conducted to explore the factors influencing the glass ceiling phenomenon, enabling women to climb up their career ladder. Therefore, as the study was conducted in relation to the glass ceiling phenomenon, this study belongs to phenomenological research (Finlay, 2011). Accordingly, based on the experiences of the women of the study, the researcher builds knowledge in order to understand the nature of the personalities of the women involved in managerial positions. Glass ceiling is a complex phenomenon that includes human feelings, connections, and emotions (Chen et

al. 2016; Tajeddini et al., 2019), and experiences that would not have been effectively acquired through quantitative studies by distributing questioners (Garza, 2007). Therefore, due to the immeasurable nature of the data related to the phenomenon, the study was conducted as a qualitative study.

The sample includes seven women respondents with varying levels of experience in different managerial positions with different family statuses and different age categories. This heterogeneity sampling selection expands theoretical and literal replication (Tajeddini et al., 2017). Furthermore, these participants were selected using the snowball sampling technique under purposive sampling (Tajeddini et al., 2017). This permitted the researcher to identify the most suitable participants for the study, thus improving the richness of the data gathered. The researcher collected data through semi-structured interviews, where an interview lasted for approximately 40–50 minutes. As a phenomenological study, it is acceptable to use a small sample size (with different criteria such as credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). However, the sample must be large enough to capture the essence of phenomenology fully. Despite the small sample size, the richness and depth of the data were evident, and saturation was achieved after conducting 6 interviews, as respondents began to provide similar responses. Thematic analysis was the analytical tool in the study. Accordingly, the interviews were tape-recorded as audio files, which were converted to written transcripts as needed by reducing unrelated data. Based on these transcripts, initial codes were identified, and then developed into themes and provide a broader sense of the data gathered. The validity of research depends on the trustworthiness of the research, which, according to Guba and Lincoln, could be determined by different criteria such as credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).



Therefore, the researcher spent a reasonable time on data collection, where extended interviews were held to discuss and explore the participants' broad experiences, thereby ensuring the study's credibility. Furthermore, the researcher tends to provide as much information about fieldwork as possible to the readers to enable them to apply the context to other fields, thereby improving data transferability. Furthermore, the researcher is always aware of the ethical considerations of the research. Pseudonyms have been used to avoid personal identities and oral consent was taken from the participants to collect and record the data. In addition, the personal contact details of the researcher were provided to the respondents, which further strengthened the trusting relationship with them, and all data gathered were password protected and destroyed after the study.

Findings and Discussion

The themes and sub-themes were derived based on the responses provided in the data analysis and were broadly categorized into three main factors: individual-level barriers, organizational-level barriers, and Social & Cultural Barriers.

Individual Level Factors

(A). Emotional Stability

Lack of emotional stability is the main factor that affects women's career growth; because of that, women must have a strong emotional balance (Napasri & Yukongdi, 2015). Women who are too emotional cannot hold higher positions. Women who are emotionally stable have successfully reached higher-level positions in organizations. The female's feminine characteristics are not suitable for managerial roles because to be a manager a person should be aggressive, competitive, and should have the ability to take risks. The way the respondents have expressed their views highlights that they have good self-

confidence and they are powerful personalities who can express views without fear which may pave the way to go to the top level in the organization

"Success in the workplace depends on emotions. My job as a top marketer is to literally figure out how to take advantage of people's emotions. I'm confident in my ability. When things are tough, I can maintain my composure and generally don't feel bad...." (G)

This quotation suggests that women who are more emotionally stable are more effective workers and have higher stress tolerance. They will climb the career ladder as a result of this.

(B). Self-confidence and positive attitudes

Women tend to be more prepared when fulfilling their tasks, and they do prior research when fulfilling a given task, which enables them to build their confidence and positive attitudes within them. The negative attitudes of women are a major individual factor that affects the glass ceiling and women's career advancement (Napasri & Yukongdi, 2015). Based on the views of the respondents, they work by cultivating confidence and positive attitudes like "I never give up" and "I can do it" in their minds. It has affected to build their personality to accept the challenges and risks in managerial roles and to reach the top-level positions in the organization.

"I never give up anything in life. If I know that I can do it, I never give up. I research it and I do it with my maximum commitment. I work until I achieve it and stop once I achieved it..." (C)

"I am a positive-minded person. If I work thinking that I cannot do this because I am a lady, I will definitely fail" (A)

The quotes above demonstrated that having a positive attitude and self-confidence

helped people realize their full potential. Their ability to tackle challenges with a positive attitude when confronted with obstacles has a significant influence on their leadership career.

(C). The aspiration to reach managerial positions

Women must have a goal to reach the top positions of the organizations. It drives them to accept the challenges and move upwards on the organizational ladder. Further, the aspiration motivates women to work hard to reach their desired positions faster.

"From the day I joined the bank I had the goal to reach a higher level in the organization and to become a manager." (D)

Individuals are more capable than they realize. Double it when it comes to ladies. Before we can be bigger, we must first think bigger. (G)

When women work hard to solve their internal problems, ultimately, they ended up at higher levels because of their commitment.

(D). Balancing work and life

Women tend to have more stress than men as they manage both family responsibilities and work responsibilities (Napasri & Yukongdi, 2015). It is very difficult to balance work and life as they have to look into their children's matters and workplace matters at the same time. But many of them have been successful in balancing their work and life while accepting it as a challenge.

"My flexible work schedule allows me to work and take care of my family at the same time. As you know, with the advancement of technology, I am

occasionally able to work from home...." (D)

According to the above quotations, Women did not give up their careers, or they did not stop advancing their careers without pursuing career opportunities to fulfil their responsibilities towards their families (Almer & Single, 2007). Additionally, D stated that she had to postpone her education and career advancement due to her family obligations for a shorter amount of time. However, she immediately regained her whole life.

"I am a woman who can multitask, you know. I am aware of when to put my family over my job and vice versa. Although juggling these two disparate realms is difficult, but I can manage it...."

Work-life balance is setting up a mindset on becoming a good mother while fulfilling the household work without considering the long hours of working at the office (Saadin, Ramli, Johari, & Harin, 2015). Some women managed to balance work and family responsibilities without considering the tiredness and pain that they encounter.

Organizational Level Factors

(A). Supportive work environment

Organizational support is necessary for women to balance their family responsibilities and work responsibilities, which helps them manage their stress. When there is a supportive organizational culture that understands the requirements of women employees, women can pursue career opportunities to advance in their careers.

"When I entered the company, I said that I am a single mom, so I have to prioritise my kids, and I was out of the office at 1 O'clock to pick up my kids, but nobody said anything. They accepted me for whom I was. So I am lucky that I got an

organization that accepts who I was, they valued the work I did, and they gave me the environment to grow...” (G)

“In my company, there’s a special play area for kids if we bring them to the workplace...” (E)

It is seen that the organizations can support women with children in balancing their family responsibilities by offering daycare centers at the office. When the organization understands the value of the women employees and their contribution to the organisation's performance, it enables women employees to perform their work responsibilities effectively to move forward along the career ladder.

(B). Training

The training is an important tool that provides education, knowledge, and leadership skills for women to acquire senior management positions in organizations (Abalkhail, 2019).

“We got support and necessary training internally to develop our career” (D)

“They send web-based training, so we had two such training sessions per month. Those are mandatory training they arranged online for us. They give targets, and until we complete the targets, we are not eligible for a promotion” (B)

Training programs are necessary for women to build their confidence to face challenges, which is necessary for women to progress through their career growth (Clarke, 2011). Therefore, as reported by the above respondents, training programs in the organization have been greatly affected by the development of their careers and the advancement of their careers to higher positions in the organization. These results support the human capital theory, which holds that women who possess knowledge and skills are more likely to shatter the glass

ceiling.

(C). Supportive superiors

The immediate supervisors closely work with the female employees. Therefore, they must have a good understanding of the employees and their social background. When the superiors understand the value of their women employees, they must give the freedom for women to fulfil their responsibilities.

“From the organizational side, they are very supportive because If I want to take leave for an emergency or if I had anything related to my children’s education, they didn’t obstruct me. I had very supportive superiors and they gave me the freedom from my side.” (D)

She has got her support from her superiors when attending to her children’s matters in an emergency. This means that her superiors have clearly understood her needs and social background and have given her the support that she needed. Therefore, she had supportive people with whom she could progress through her career to climb the organizational ladder. These results align with the social capital theory. Social capital argues that social connections are assets that can help women advance in their careers.

“My company saw the potential in me, and my boss helped me to get exposure in different fields and pushed me to think out of the frame...” (G)

According to the respondent, her superiors at all levels have identified their potential from the beginning and have guided their career path to reach higher-level positions. Therefore, support from the most influential people in the organization is necessary for women to advance their careers to represent upper-level positions in the organization.

(D). Organizational policies and practices



The recruitment, promotion, and other policies of the organizations influence women's career advancement (Kausar, 2010). Some organizations prefer to recruit male employees for their certain job roles, but they refuse females to apply for certain positions because their recruitment policy has been set up to hire only male employees. Policies for diversity recruiting and promotion have been established by a few other organizations. As an illustration, participant A shares the following about her experience:

"My organization's diversity and inclusion policy is being implemented effectively. The top management of the company demonstrated areas of lack of diversity and the kind of goals each department should create in order to guarantee that women have equal opportunities. It is a blessing that I work there...." (A)

Based on A's explanation, when organizations formulate their promotional practices and policies equally for men and women, they can reach higher positions faster. Therefore, in the Sri Lankan context, even though there are male-dominated organizations that exist, they equally provide opportunities for women based on their performance to advance their professional careers. That helps women to grab the opportunities and grow upwards in their career ladder.

(E). The male-dominant culture and gender discrimination

Discriminatory work cultures can be seen in organizations if the organization is highly male-dominant. This affects women's ability to pursue opportunities to advance their careers (Tlaiss & Kausar, 2011). Male-dominant work cultures have a stereotypical attitude that views women as weak and less competent than men, which hinders women from moving upward in their career ladder (Abhalkhail, 2018).

"I have never experienced discrimination in the workplace, and things are getting better and better from when I first started my career 15 years ago." (B).

There is a traditional myth that women cannot work as men (Bombowela & De Alwis, 2013). This view is predominantly seen in male-dominant work cultures where the organization favours men over women and discriminates against women by not offering career opportunities. Nonetheless, some organizations have policies that treat everyone equally and without regard to gender, which helps women advance in their careers. These results contradict the fundamental assumptions of structural theory since gender differences in the allocation of opportunities and resources are a product of an unequal society.

Social and Cultural Barriers

(A). Attitudes towards Women

In Sri Lanka, childcaring and looking after elderly parents are traditionally identified as women's work (Wijayatilake, 2001), further in this study, it was argued that a woman should not go alone at night, and if she does, she should be accompanied by a male or an elderly person.

"My parents do not like when I am working late at night at the office because I am a female. They do not like when I drive from office to home at night." (E)

Respondent E, who is unmarried, mentioned that her parents did not like her working late at night at the office because they believe that the cultural attitude is that females should be at home late at night. As per her, women face a barrier from the attitudes embedded in Sri Lankan society because when workplace responsibilities are a concern regardless of the time, they must work long hours and late at night. However, the inherited beliefs in the culture do not allow women to venture out for work

at night. This would be an obstacle to women's career advancement. But for modern-day women, the culture is not a barrier. They do not perceive culture as a barrier to their advancement.

"In Sri Lanka, our society has a culture saying that we should care for girls. But sometimes it doesn't matter for us. (E)

Bombowela & De Alwis (2013) recommended that in Sri Lankan culture, people should avoid the perception of women as a set of people who need more care. Because it is a disadvantage for the upward

career mobility of women, where the cultural attitudes embedded in the families and workplaces limit women from getting work exposure to develop their careers.

Developed Model

Based on the above findings, this study proposes the below conceptual model in describing the barriers to glass ceiling and women's career advancement that reflects well the Sri Lankan situation particularly relating to women in top managerial positions.

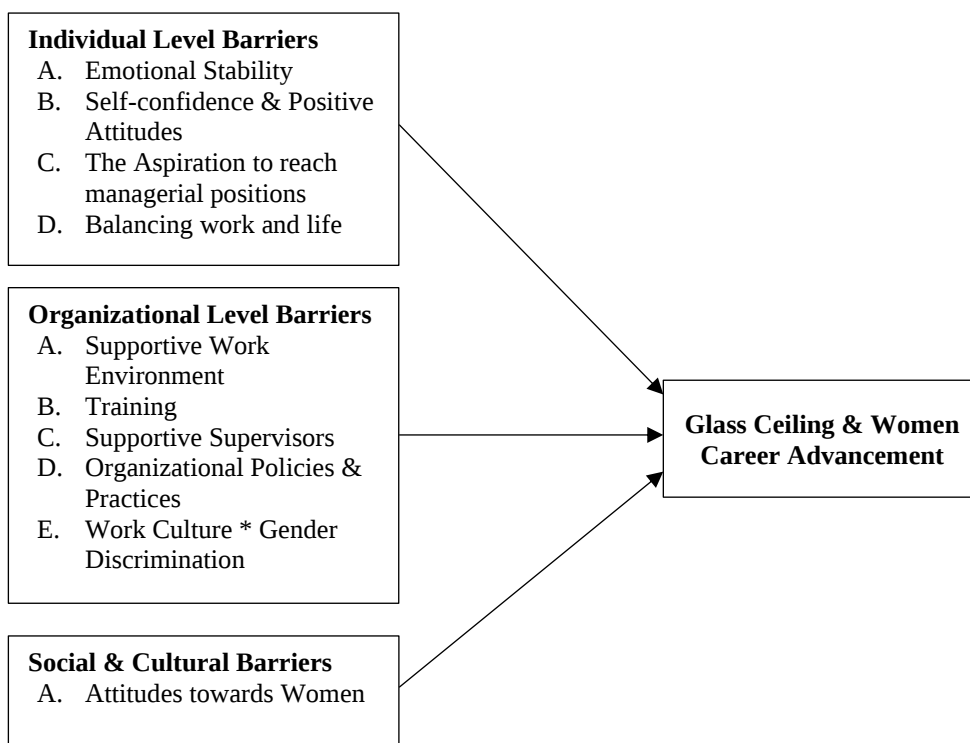


Figure 01: Proposed Model for Glass Ceiling and Women's Career Advancement for Women in Top Managerial Positions in Sri Lanka

Source: Research Findings

Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors that influence women's

advancement into senior management roles in Sri Lankan enterprises. The results showed that these remarkable women had all achieved success on their own, breaking the glass ceiling. The research identified



three main factors affecting women's career advancement: individual level, organizational level, and social & cultural level.

Individual-level factors include emotional stability, self-confidence, managerial career aspirations, and work-life balance. Women need to balance their emotions, express ideas, and have positive attitudes about their personalities in order to succeed as female managers. Organizations recognize their efforts and offer higher positions, but women often struggle with marriage and family responsibilities, which can hinder upward career mobility. Balancing work-life responsibilities often leads to sacrifices in family activities and career success. Support from family members and organizations is crucial for women to achieve higher positions in organizations. Organizational-level factors include a supportive work environment, supportive superiors, training programs, and organizational policies and practices. Organizational factors, such as supportive work environments and superiors, are crucial for women's career development. Training programs help women develop skills for top-level positions and promote upward career mobility. Organizational policies and practices, such as recruitment and promotion practices, also impact women's career advancement, ensuring they are rewarded for their performance regardless of gender. The study identified social and cultural barriers affecting Sri Lankan women's career advancement. The patriarchal culture views women as needing protection, which is still present in modern and organizational environments. However, modern-day women don't care about these inherited attitudes, adapting to changing environments and advancing their careers in organizations.

Breaking the Glass Ceiling in Sri Lanka involves several strategies. At the individual level, women should actively seek professional networks, pursue

continuous learning and skill development, prioritize work-life balance, and implement inclusive policies. Organizations should enforce gender equality policies, promote family-friendly policies, and establish mentorship and sponsorship programs. Training should be provided on diversity, equity, and inclusion, and performance evaluations should be transparent and merit-based. Public awareness campaigns should challenge societal norms and stereotypes about gender roles, and positive narratives about women balancing career and family responsibilities should inspire young women. Education and community engagement should integrate gender equality education into school curriculums, and collaboration between government, private sector, and non-governmental organizations can help address gender inequality. Finally, policy advocacy and legislation should advocate for stronger legislative frameworks, such as anti-discrimination laws and mandatory gender quotas for boards and executive positions.

Future Research Directions

The study used a qualitative approach in finding the factors affecting Glass Ceiling and women's career advancement. The model presented in the study can be tested using the quantitative approach by using a large sample in future research. As the sample comprises multi-demographic features in different sectors, future studies can be conducted separately in different sectors and in different contexts of the country to identify, compare and contrast the differences in the factors which affect the career advancement of women.

Future research also should focus on sector-specific analyses to understand the unique challenges faced by women in different industries. For example, the barriers in the tech industry might differ from those in finance or healthcare. This can help tailor interventions and policies to the specific needs of each sector. Further, conducting



longitudinal studies to track the career progression of women over time would provide insights into the long-term impacts of the glass ceiling. This approach can help identify critical points in women's careers where interventions are most needed and effective. Future researchers also can evaluate the effectiveness of existing policies and interventions aimed at promoting gender equality in the workplace. Research should assess the impact of gender quotas, mentorship programs, diversity training, and other initiatives on women's career advancement.

The glass ceiling remains a pervasive issue in Sri Lanka, shaped by cultural, organizational, and economic factors. While there have been positive steps towards promoting gender equality, significant challenges persist. Continued efforts are needed to address the systemic barriers that hinder women's advancement to leadership roles. By implementing and enforcing comprehensive policies, promoting cultural change, and supporting organizational initiatives that foster diversity and inclusion, Sri Lanka can make strides towards breaking the glass ceiling and ensuring equal opportunities for women in leadership.

References

Abalkhail, J. M. (2018). Women's career development in an Arab Middle Eastern context. *Human Resource Development International*, 21(5), 425-442.

Abalkhail, J. M. (2019). Women managing women: Hierarchical relationships and career impact. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 34(6), 466-485.

Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations. *Gender & Society*, 4(2), 139-158.

Afiouni, F., Ruël, H., & Schuler, R. (2014). Women's careers in the Arab Middle East: Understanding institutional constraints to the boundaryless career view. *Career Development International*, 19(3), 314-336.

Akpınar, C. S. (2012). Career barriers for women executives and the Glass Ceiling Syndrome: the case study comparison between French and Turkish women executives. Doctoral school of Economics and Management.

Asian organizations: a tri-decadal review.

Becker, G. S. (1964). *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education*. University of Chicago Press.

Bombuwela, P. M., & De Alwis, A. C. (2013). Effects of Glass Ceiling on Women Career Development in Private Sector Organizations—Case of Sri Lanka. *Journal of Competitiveness*, 5(2), 3-19.

Bombuwela, P. M., & De Alwis, A. C. (2013). Effects of Glass Ceiling on Women Career Development in Private Sector Organizations—Case of Sri Lanka. *Journal of Competitiveness*, 5(2), 3-19.

Budig, M. J., & England, P. (2001). The wage penalty for motherhood. *American Sociological Review*, 66(2), 204-225

Callister, P., Newell, J., Perry, M., & Scott, D. (2006). The Gendered Tertiary Education Transition: When Did It Take pace & What Are Some of the Possible Policy Implications. *Policy Quarterly*.

Catalyst. (2020). Women in the Workforce: Global. Catalyst.

Chen, C.W., Tuliao, K.V., Chang, Y.Y. and Cullen, J.B. (2016). Does gender influence managers' ethics? A cross-cultural analysis. *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 25(4), 345–362, <https://doi.org/10.1111/beer.12122>.

Clarke, M. (2011). Advancing women's careers through leadership development programs. *Employee Relations*, 498-515.



- Herath, H.M.T.S., Surangi, H.A.K.N.S. and Hemsiri, T.N., KJM, 2024, 13 (02)
- Cotter, D. A., Hermesen, J. M., Ovadia, S., & Vanneman, R. (2001). The Glass Ceiling Effect. *Social Forces*, 80(2), 655-681.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-1299.
- Datta, S., & Agrawal, U. A. (2017). Factors affecting career advancement of Indian women managers. *South Asian Journal of Business Studies*, 6(3), 314-336.
- Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka. (2020). *Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey Annual Report 2020*. Department of Census and Statistics.
- Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka. (2021). *Sri Lanka Census of Population and Housing 2021*. Department of Census and Statistics.
- Dowling, G. (2017). The Glass Ceiling: A fact or a misguided metaphor? *Annals in Social Responsibility*, 3(1), 57-73.
- Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L. (2007). Women and the Labyrinth of Leadership. *Harvard Business Review*, 85(9), 62-71.
- Ely, R. J., Ibarra, H., & Kolb, D. M. (2011). Taking Gender Into Account: Theory and Design for Women's Leadership Development Programs. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 10(3), 474-493.
- Federal Glass Ceiling Commission. (1995). *Good for Business: Making Full Use of the Nation's Human Capital*. U.S. Department of Labor.
- Finlay, L. (2011). *Phenomenology for Therapists: Researching the Lived World*. John Wiley and Sons, New Jersey.
- Gompers, P., & Kovvali, S. (2018). The Other Diversity Dividend. *Harvard Business Review*, 96(4), 72-77.
- Gompers, P., & Kovvali, S. (2018). The other diversity dividend. *Harvard Business Review*, 96(4), 72-77.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. SAGE Publications.
- Hennayake, H. S., & Rajapakse, R. (2020). The impact of cultural factors on the career advancement of women in the Sri Lankan corporate sector. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 12(1), 45-58.
- Hoobler, J. M., Masterson, C. R., Nkomo, S. M., & Michel, E. J. (2018). The Business Case for Women Leaders: Meta-Analysis, Research Critique, and Path Forward. *Journal of Management*, 44(6), 2473-2499.
- Hopkins, M. M., O'Neil, D. A., Passerelli, A., & Bilimoria, D. (2008). Women's leadership development strategic practices for women and organizations. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 60(4), 348-365.



- Herath, H.M.T.S., Surangi, H.A.K.N.S. and Hemsiri, T.N., KJM, 2024, 13 (02)
- Ibarra, H. (1993). Personal Networks of Women and Minorities in Management: A Conceptual Framework. *Academy of Management Review*, 18(1), 56-87.
- Ibarra, H., Ely, R. J., & Kolb, D. M. (2013). Women Rising: The Unseen Barriers. *Harvard Business Review*, 91(9), 60-66.
- Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2020). *Women in National Parliaments*. Inter-Parliamentary Union.
- International Finance Corporation (IFC). (2020). *Women in Work 2020*. IFC.
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2021). *Women in Business and Management: Gaining Momentum in Sri Lanka*. ILO.
- Jayachandran, S. (2021). Social Norms as a Barrier to Women's Employment in Developing Countries. *International Monetary Fund Economic Review*, 69(3), 576-595.
- Jayathilaka, W., & Uduwela, U. (2018). Impact of Glass Ceiling factors on Women Career Development in the Banking Sector: Evidence from non-state banks in Colombo District. *Journal of Management and Business Research*, 8(2), 105-114.
- Krook, M. L. (2020). *Quotas for Women in Politics: Gender and Candidate Selection Reform Worldwide*. Oxford University Press.
- Kuruppuarachchi, J., & Surangi, H. (2019). Barriers to career advancement of women managers in the Sri Lankan corporate sector. *International Journal of Management and Applied Science*, 5(3), 45-49.
- Lathabhavan, R., & Balasubramanian, S. A. (2017). Glass ceiling & women employees in
- Martinez, L. R., Kane, R. E., Ferris, D. L., & Brooks, A. W. (2020). When an 'Educated Guess' Becomes an 'Uneducated One': Emotion Recognition Biases Across the Socioeconomic Spectrum. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 41(1), 31-45.
- Mavin, S. (2008). Approaches to careers in Management: why UK organisations should consider gender. *Career Development International*, 13-20.
- McKinsey & Company. (2022). *Women in the Workplace 2022*. McKinsey & Company.
- Mohammadkhani, K., & Dariush, A. (2016). The impact of glass ceiling on women's career development. *International Journal of Human Resource Studies*, 6(2), 34-45.
- Morrison, A. M., White, R. P., & Van Velsor, E. (1987). *Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Can Women Reach the Top of America's Largest Corporations?* Addison-Wesley.
- MSCI. (2021). *Women on Boards Progress Report 2021*. MSCI.
- Napasri, T., & Yukongdi, V. (2015). A study on Thai female executives: Perceived barriers for career advancement. *Review of Integrative Business and Economics Research*, 4(3), 45-57.



- Herath, H.M.T.S., Surangi, H.A.K.N.S. and Hemsiri, T.N., KJM, 2024, 13 (02)
New Data Shine Light on Gender Gaps in the Labour Market. (2023).
- Noland, M., Moran, T., & Kotschwar, B. R. (2016). Is Gender Diversity Profitable? Evidence from a Global Survey. *Peterson Institute for International Economics*.
- O'Neil, D., & Bilimoria, D. (2005). Women's career development phases: Idealism, endurance and reinvention. *Career Development International*, 168-189.
- OECD. (2017). *The Pursuit of Gender Equality: An Uphill Battle*. OECD Publishing.
- Purcell, D., MacArthur, K. R., & Samblanet, S. (2010). Gender and the glass ceiling at work. *Sociology Compass*, 4(9), 705-717.
- Ragins, B. R., Townsend, B., & Mattis, M. (1998). Gender Gap in the Executive Suite: CEOs and Female Executives Report on Breaking the Glass Ceiling. *Academy of Management Executive*, 12(1), 28-42.
- Ridgeway, C. L. (2011). *Framed by Gender: How Gender Inequality Persists in the Modern World*. Oxford University Press.
- Saadin, I., Ramli, K., Johari, H., & Harin, N. A. (2015). Women and barriers for upward career advancement: A survey at Perak State Secretariat, Ipoh, Perak. *Journal of Management and Business Research*, 12(1), 43-50.
- Sahoo, M., & Lenka, U. (2020). Breaking the glass ceiling: Opportunity for the organization. *Development and Learning in Organizations*, 34(4), 1-4.
- Schwartz, F. N. (1989). Management Women and the New Facts of Life. *Harvard Business Review*, 67(1), 65-76.
- Sharma, P., & Kaur, R. (2019). Glass ceiling for women and its impact on women employee's job satisfaction and career advancement. *International Journal of Management Studies*, 6(1), 15-22.
- Sharma, P., & Rastogi, R. (2019). Corporate gender diversity and financial performance: The role of women CEOs. *Academy of Management Proceedings*, 2019(1), 14124.
- Singh, A. (2019). Degendered relationship in the UAE: Breaking the glass ceiling. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 34(6), 478-494.
- Spencer Stuart. (2022). 2022 U.S. Spencer Stuart Board Index. Spencer Stuart.
- Tajeddini, K., Ratten, V., & Denisa, M. (2019). Female entrepreneurship: How are women entrepreneurs transforming and leading the world of business? *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*, 11(2), 97-102.
- Thornton, G. (2019). *Women in Business: Building a Blueprint for Action*. Grant Thornton.



Herath, H.M.T.S., Surangi, H.A.K.N.S. and Hemsiri, T.N., KJM, 2024, 13 (02)

Tlaiss, H., & Kauser, S. (2011). The impact of gender, family, and work on the career advancement of Lebanese women managers. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 26(1), 8-36.

United Nations. (2020). Gender Equality: Why It Matters. United Nations.

University Grants Commission Sri Lanka. (2021). *University Statistics 2019/2020*. UGC.

Wijayatilake, K. (2001). *Unravelling Herstories: A Three Generational Study of Women in Sri Lanka*.

Williams, C. L., Kilanski, K., & Muller, C. (2014). Corporate diversity programs and gender inequality in the oil and gas industry. *Work and Occupations*, 41(4), 440-476.

World Bank. (2020). Women, Business and the Law 2020. World Bank Group.

World Economic Forum. (2021). Global Gender Gap Report 2021. *World Economic Forum*.

