

Role of Work Engagement in Mediating the Relationship between Women's Perception of Glass Ceiling and Career Growth in IT companies

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Abstract

Workplace environment plays a crucial role in an individual's perception of his career growth. Although the proportion of women in the workforce has increased over the past few decades, it is uncertain whether their inclusion in the workforce has been fully accepted by all. Glass-ceiling is a hurdle obstructing women's progress to higher leadership or managerial positions due to misconceived perceptions about their unsuitability. The present study aimed to examine the impact of women's perception of glass-ceiling and work engagement on their career growth using multiple regression analysis. It further examines the role of women's work engagement as a mediator, influencing the relationship between perception of glass-ceiling and career growth using mediation analysis. Data was collected from 186 women working in IT companies using Elacqua et al.'s (2009) adapted perception of Glass-ceiling (Babic & Hansez, 2021), Career Growth Scale (Weng, McElroy, Morrow, & Liu, 2010) and UWES-9 (Schaufeli et al., 2006). Findings of multiple regression analysis show that the perception of the glass-ceiling and work engagement significantly predict career growth. Further, the mediation analysis revealed that work engagement partially mediates the relationship between the perception of the glass-ceiling and career growth. The findings have implications for organizations to promote an inclusive work culture and encourage a sense of vigor, dedication and absorption of female employees towards their work.

Keywords: Glass-ceiling, career growth, work engagement, women in IT, mediation analysis.

Introduction

"Abala Jeevan Hai Tumari Yahi Kahani, Aanchal Mein Hai Dudh Aur Aankhon Mein Pani" are the famous lines of a renowned national poet of India, Maithili Sharan Gupt (1933) in "Yashodhara". It means- Oh Woman! Your condition has remained static since times immemorial, you have spread kindness, love and motherhood, but in return you have received tears. These lines were written at the time when women were majorly restricted to the four

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walls of the household and sacrificed their lives and ambitions for the betterment of the family.

Over the years, the position of women in India has improved drastically, and they are found in all walks of life, including those considered the domain of males. The proportion of females in the workforce has increased and they are no longer restricted to four walls of the house. Yet, they tend to face additional hurdles in order to attain higher positions or even to get equal pay as compared to men. This is due to gender stereotypes surrounded by certain expectations of women at the workplace (Heilman, 2012). In Fortune 500 companies, there are only 10.4% women CEOs (Hinchliffe, 2023).

‘Glass ceiling’ refers to the unseen obstruction encountered by women in her quest to attain top position in her professional hierarchy. The glass-ceiling is a hurdle that obstructs women’s progress to higher leadership or managerial positions due to misconceived perceptions about their unsuitability.

After examining various studies on the subject, the following characteristic features of glass-ceiling emerge: less noticeable, continual hurdle, discriminatory, conscious and unconscious, qualified women’s promotion to senior position restricted (Zeng, 2011). Researchers postulate that the term glass-ceiling is not only restricted to the barrier for women but also in respect of pay, race, religion, sex, ethnicity, etc (FGCC, 1995).

Ramgutty-Wong (2000) found that CEOs were indifferent to the problems of women employees, thus not giving them equal opportunities for promotion. Further, Thanacoody et al, (2006) observed after comparing Indian and Australian cultures that there exists stereotypes, prejudices etc., relating to gender discrimination in both cultures wherein it revealed that the women were perceived as inferior to their male counterparts and were overlooked for leadership roles.

Crenshaw (1991) first employed the term intersectionality for social categorisation like race, class, gender etc. Crenshaw (1989) observed while explaining the case of General Motors that the race or gender alone are not marginalised. However, intersectionality of race, gender, class etc. leads to marginalisation. Elacqua et al. (2009) explained glass-ceiling with the help of a study on 685 managers at a large Midwestern Insurance Company wherein it was suggested that relation between perception of glass-ceiling and organisational factors (interpersonal & situational) is mediated by the perception of differential treatment.

Weng and Hu (2009) state that career growth refers to enlarging professional potential and goal and being compensated in terms of promotions and monetary benefits for their abilities. Unfortunately, women, despite all the prerequisites of being equal to men in terms of educational background and skill, have difficulty in career progression (Eagly & Carli, 2007). A study carried out by McKinsey & Co. (2012) in respect of 744 managers in 10 major Asia-Pacific stock markets showed women representation in boardrooms was; Korea 1%, Australia 13%, China 8% and India 5%. These statistics indicate the presence of a glass-ceiling in career growth of women all round the world despite an attitudinal shift as far as women’s role in society is concerned; from home-maker to career oriented who can reach top of any organisation.

Balasubramanian and Lathabhavan (2017) observed that denial, resilience, resignation and acceptance are 4 beliefs in glass-ceiling and first 2 said beliefs are positively related to work engagement and last 2 beliefs are negatively related. Ronald, Mustafa, and Lisa (2010) found that women displayed high levels of work engagement, psychological well being and job satisfaction, whenever they are provided with encouraging organisational practices. Messarra (2014) concluded that the commitment and work engagement of employees is adversely affected due to perceived unequal treatment at workplace meted out to them.

Purpose of the Study

The notion of glass-ceiling is not a recent occurrence but lately it has attracted the attention of researchers. It occurs when there are obstructions for women and other oppressed individuals from attaining top professional positions. Especially in the IT sector, there are few female employees. This glass-ceiling can affect the career growth of women working in these companies. Other factors like work engagement, commitment towards the organization also affect this perception of glass-ceiling. Therefore, an attempt is made to examine the effect of perception of glass-ceiling and work engagement of female employees on their career growth. Further, it was investigated whether work engagement mediates the relationship between perception of glass-ceiling and work engagement.

Objectives

1. To assess the effect of perception of glass-ceiling and work engagement on career growth.
2. To assess the indirect effect of glass-ceiling on career growth through work engagement.

Hypothesis H1: Perception of glass-ceiling and work engagement have a significant effect on women's career growth. H2: Work engagement significantly mediates the relationship between the women's perception of the glass-ceiling and career growth.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 186 women working in IT companies all over India, through a random sampling method. The average age of all the participants was 27.6 years, 55 were married, 130 were unmarried and 1 was divorced, and out of the total participants: 43 had children and 143 did not have children.

Tools

The data was collected online through google forms. The demographic information included age, name of the organization, educational qualification, marital status, number of children, nature of the organization and experience. Standardized tools used were:

Glass Ceiling- For assessing the perception of glass-ceiling, an adapted scale by Babic and Hansez (2021), originally developed by Elacqua et al. (2009) was used. It is a 4-point Likert scale with a total of six items. Its internal consistency, measured using Cronbach's alpha, is 0.84. (citation)

Organizational career growth was measured using a 5-point likert type Career Growth Scale (Weng et al., 2010) which has four dimensions: (1) career goal progress, (2) professional ability development, (3) promotion speed, and (4) remuneration growth. It has 15 items and the Cronbach alpha for the dimensions ranges from 0.76 to 0.86.

To measure work engagement, UWES-9 (Schaufeli et al., 2006) was used. It has three subscales: vigor, dedication and absorption. All items were scored on a 7-point frequency rating scale ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (always).

Ethical Considerations

Voluntary participation and informed consent were obtained from the participants after providing them with clear information about the study's purpose. To safeguard the participants, privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity were maintained and they were assured that the data collected will be strictly used for research purposes only. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Procedure

This study was designed to explore the effect of women's perception of glass-ceiling and work engagement on career growth and also examine whether work engagement played the role of a mediating variable between perception of glass-ceiling and career growth. Data was collected online from 186 women working in IT sectors through a convenient sampling method. After scoring the responses as per the scoring norms provided in the manuals, data was analyzed using SPSSv. 26.

Research Design & Analysis

The present study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional research design wherein the effect of the independent variables: perception of glass-ceiling and work engagement on the dependent variable: career growth was examined using multiple regression analysis. Role of work engagement was also examined as a mediator between women's perception of glass-ceiling and career growth using mediation analysis. SPSS v.26 was used to analyze the data.

Results

The present research assesses the effect of women's perception of glass-ceiling and work engagement on career growth using multiple regression analysis. Further, the mediating role of work engagement in impacting the relationship between perception of glass-ceiling on career growth of women employees in IT companies was also computed.

Table 1 Mean, SD and Pearson's Correlation between dependent and independent variables (n=186)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Perception of Glass Ceiling	2.06	0.50	-		
2. Work Engagement	2.97	0.95	-0.27**	-	

3. Career Growth	3.44	0.70	-0.30**	0.54**	-
**p<0.01					

Table 1 shows the results of the correlational analysis to understand the inter-relationships between the variables. A significant negative correlation is found between perception of glass ceiling and work engagement ($r=-0.27$, $p<0.01$) and between perception of glass ceiling and career growth ($r=-0.30$, $p<0.01$), whereas a significant positive relationship exists between career growth and work engagement ($r=0.54$, $p<0.01$).

Table 2. Multiple Regression predicting Career Growth (n=186)

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients B	Standardized Coefficients Beta	SE	t	p	95% CI
(Constant)	2.85		0.26	10.99	<.001	[2.34, 3.36]
GC	-0.24	-0.17	0.90	-2.68	<.01	[-0.41, -0.06]
WE	0.36	0.50	0.05	7.90	<.001	[0.27, 0.45]

Note: $R^2 = 0.323$, $F(2, 183) = 43.81$; $p<0.001$ Independent variables: GC- Perception of Glass-Ceiling; WE- Work Engagement

Table 2 indicates results of multiple regression of the two independent variables- Perception of glass-ceiling and work engagement predicting the dependent variable i.e., Career growth. The model explains that 32.3 % of the variance in career growth is caused by perception of glass-ceiling and work engagement. The coefficient of glass-ceiling is negative and statistically significant ($\beta = -0.17$, $p < 0.01$) with career growth, which means that as the perception of glass-ceiling increases, career growth decreases. Work engagement has a positive and statistically significant effect on career growth ($\beta = 0.50$, $p < 0.001$), indicating higher work engagement is associated with higher career growth.

Since all three variables are correlated, as depicted in Table 1 above, mediation was computed using ordinary least squares path analysis performed by the PROCESS SPSS macro (Hayes, 2022), as seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Mediation Analysis showing Model Coefficients of path a, b and c' (n=186)

Antecedent	Path	M (Work Engagement)				Path	Y (Career Growth)			
		B	SE	p	β		B	SE	p	β
X (GC)	a	-.53	.14	0.00	-0.27	c'	-.24	.09	.01	-.17
M (Work Engagement)		-	-	-	-	b	.36	.05	.00	.50
		$R^2 = 0.074$					$R^2 = 0.323$			

		F (1,184) = 14.85, p<.001		F (2,183) = 43.81, p<.001
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Note. GC- Perception of Glass-Ceiling; WE- Work Engagement; CG-Career Growth X (Predictor)- GC; M (Mediator)- WE; Y (Dependent variable)- CG

a: GC → WE

b: WE → CG

c': GC → CG

The results of mediation analysis in Table 3 indicates that there was a significant direct effect of perception of glass ceiling on career growth i.e., path c' ($\beta = -0.17$, $p < .01$); significant effect of perception of glass ceiling on work engagement i.e., path a ($\beta = -0.27$, $p < .001$) and perception of work engagement on career growth i.e., path b ($\beta = 0.50$, $p < .001$). However, the total effect of glass ceiling on career growth, i.e., path c, ($\beta = -0.43$, $p < .01$) was significant.

Table 4 Total, Direct and Indirect effect of X (GC) on Y (Career Growth) (n = 186)

Effect		Coefficient	SE	p	95% CI
Total (c path)		-0.43	0.98	<0.01	[-0.622; -0.234]
Direct (c' path)		-0.24	0.09	<0.01	[-0.412; -0.062]
Indirect (ab path)		-0.19	0.06	<0.01	[-0.306; -0.085]
<i>Note.</i>					
c (Total): GC→ CG					
c' (Direct): GC--> CG					
ab (Indirect): GC-->WE→ CG (mediation)					

In addition, the bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect ($ab = -0.19$) based on 5,000 bootstrap resamples was entirely below zero (-0.30 to -0.09), suggesting that work engagement mediates the association between the glass ceiling and career growth.

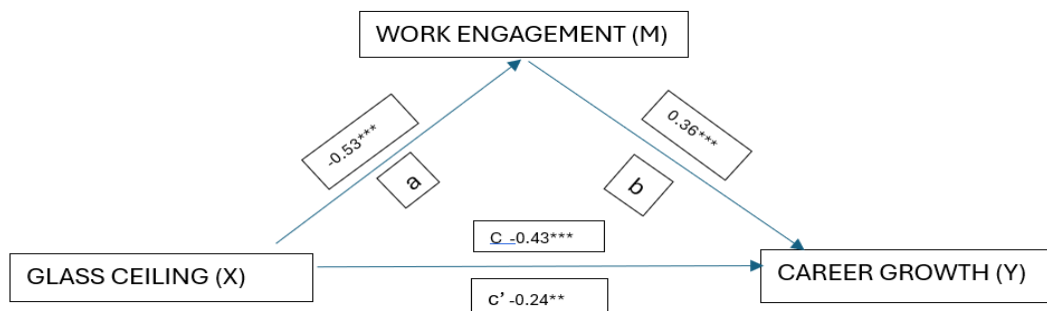


Figure 1. Diagrammatic representation of the Mediation Analysis

****p<0.01 ***p<0.001**

Figure 1. Simple Mediation Model showing the unstandardised effects for the relationship between the perception of glass ceiling and career growth as mediated by work engagement

As seen in Figure 1, the perception of glass ceiling has a negative but significant effect on the outcome variable i.e., work engagement (coefficient -0.53, $p<.001$), while work engagement has significant and a positive effect on the career growth (coefficient 0.36, $p<.001$). A significant but negative effect of the women's perception of glass-ceiling on their career growth ($c' = -0.24$, $p<0.01$) is noticed. However, the total effect of glass-ceiling on their career growth ($c = -0.43$, $p<0.01$) is also negative and significant. Indirect effect ($a \times b$) of perception of glass-ceiling on the career growth of is -0.19 ($p<0.01$).

Discussion

In the present study, the predictors were glass ceiling and work engagement and the dependent variable was career growth. Work engagement was also examined as a mediator. Results indicate a significant negative correlation between the perception of the glass ceiling and career growth ($r = -0.30$, $p<0.01$) indicating that individuals who perceive a higher glass ceiling are likely to experience lower career growth. The study also shows a significant negative correlation between the perception of glass ceiling and job engagement ($r = -0.27$, $p<.01$) pointing that persons who have a higher perception of glass ceiling, will have a low level of job engagement. A significant positive correlation between job engagement and career growth ($r = 0.54$, $p<.01$) is noticed.

Further, a multiple regression analysis shows the combined effects of the glass ceiling and work engagement on career growth, with $R^2 = 0.323$ indicating 32.3 % of the variation in career growth is caused by glass ceiling and work engagement with a significant F value, [$F(2, 183) = 43.81$, $p < 0.001$]. The results indicate a significant level of variance in career growth attributable to the combined effects of the glass ceiling and work engagement.

Mediation analysis show a significant negative relation between the perception of glass ceiling and job engagement ($a = -0.53$, $p<.001$) pointing that persons who have a higher perception of glass ceiling, will have a low level of job engagement. These findings are in line with research of Messarra (2014) who found that the work engagement is adversely affected by perceived discrimination by workers at the workplace.

The study also examined the effect of work engagement on the career growth of women using the mediation analysis. Findings indicate a significant positive effect of work engagement on the career growth of women, ($b = 0.36$, $p<.001$). This is supported by the findings of Bakker & Demerouti (2008) and Mills & Fullagar (2017), who also concluded that work engagement positively predicts the career growth of employees in an organization. This is because employees' higher work engagement results in them making greater efforts, taking initiative and seeking out development opportunities, which in turn are crucial for career advancement (Hu & Wang, 2014) and key drivers of career growth. Moreover, such proactive employees with higher work engagement tend to be noticed by the management, thus increasing their promotion and other career advancement opportunities.

In order to examine the direct effect of perception of glass-ceiling on the career growth of women, the results of mediation analysis suggest a significant but negative effect of the women's perception of glass-ceiling on their career growth ($c' = -0.24$, $p < 0.01$). However, the total effect of glass-ceiling on their career growth ($c = -0.43$, $p < 0.01$) is also negative and significant. This suggests that individuals who have higher perception of glass-ceiling in their workplace are likely to experience lower career growth. This result aligns with Messarra's (2014) findings that highlight the detrimental effects of perceived barriers, such as glass-ceiling, on career advancement and employee engagement. The perceived organizational barriers result in diminished career aspirations and reduced engagement at work, since they believe there are a number of barriers to their advancement within the organization. Eagly & Carli (2007) also had similar findings, wherein women who experienced obstructions in their organizations felt deprived of career advancement. This has an adverse impact on their career decisions and self-efficacy (Wright, Perrone-McGovern Boo, & White, 2014).

The study also examined the mediating effect of work engagement on the relationship of glass ceiling and career growth. It reveals that the indirect effect ($a \times b$) of perception of glass-ceiling on the career growth of women is -0.19 ($p < 0.01$). It is observed that indirect effect has marginally reduced the value to -0.19 from -0.24 . This partial mediation suggests significant but negative impact of the perception of the glass ceiling on career growth mediating through work engagement. Only few studies have been undertaken with mediator as work engagement. Balasubramanian and Lathabhavan (2018) performed the first study to test the mediating role of work engagement in glass ceiling beliefs and job satisfaction, wherein it was seen that women's optimistic glass ceiling beliefs – denial and resilience – remove barriers, the women feel more engaged in work, which is, in turn, related to increased job satisfaction. However, the pessimistic glass ceiling beliefs – resignation and acceptance – related negatively to work engagement and resulted in the women being less engaged in their work, thereby providing lower levels of job satisfaction. In short, work engagement fully mediates the relationship between glass ceiling beliefs and job satisfaction. (Balasubramanian, SA and Lathabhavan, R, 2018). Present study also had work engagement, as mediator like the research of Balasubramanian & other, and found work engagement mediating the relationship between the relationship of the perception of glass ceiling and career growth. Similarly, research by Khan & Khan showed that the direct effect of glass ceiling on women career advancement was reduced from total effect due to mediation of work and family conflict of women. Further, the relationship between work family conflict and women's career advancement was found to be moderated by perceived organisational support (Khan, A & Khan, N, 2022).

It was revealed that the work engagement partially mediated the role between perception of the glass ceiling on career growth. The partial mediation suggests that the negative impact of the perception of the glass ceiling on career growth operates through its influence on work engagement.

Limitations

The results of the mediation analysis should be interpreted in the context of the specific study design and sample size. Moreover, one needs to be cautious in generalizing the results since the sample may not be representative of the entire population. Additionally, the influence of

specific organizational cultures or policies was not controlled for, which might affect the perception of the glass-ceiling and the levels of work engagement and career growth. The reliance on self-reported measures, for all 3 variables in the study, may have introduced an element of bias. It is also likely that the subjects may have resorted to socially desirable answers or they may have been affected by the fear that management might use this data. The present variables might not fully capture the notion of glass-ceiling. It is important to consider the potential for confounding variables that may affect the relationship between the variables of interest.

Implications

Organizations should strive to eliminate perceived barriers such as the glass-ceiling by promoting inclusive policies and practices. This includes transparency, objectivity, laid down promotion criteria, equality, justice, diversity and inclusiveness. Enhancing work engagement through targeted programs can significantly impact career growth. Organizations should invest in initiatives that increase job satisfaction, such as recognition programs, promotional opportunities, safe and congenial work environment. Implementing mentorship programs can help employees navigate perceived barriers and enhance their career growth. Managers should actively support and guide employees, fostering a more engaged and motivated workforce. Managers should be trained to recognize and mitigate biases that contribute to the perception of a glass-ceiling. This can include bias training and implementing objective performance evaluation processes. Employees should be encouraged to engage in continuous professional development and seek out mentorship opportunities. Building a strong professional network and actively participating in development programs can help mitigate the effects of perceived barriers. Programs to build resilience and coping strategies can help employees manage and overcome the negative impacts of perceived organizational barriers, thereby enhancing both work engagement and career growth.

Future Research Suggestions

In order to effectively display causal relationships, longitudinal studies should be carried out on the subject. The results of such longitudinal studies can be generalized to the whole population and would be better to understand the long-term effects. Studies should also aim to include other sectors of the industry, as in this study only the IT sector is covered. Further, qualitative methods of research may also be employed in order to elicit deep insights on the subject.

Conclusion

The perception of glass-ceiling has a negative direct effect on the work engagement while the work engagement has a positive direct effect on the career growth. There is a significant mediation effect of perception of glass-ceiling on career growth (outcome variable) through work engagement as the mediator. This suggests that the perception of glass-ceiling indirectly affects the career growth of women through the mediator- work engagement.

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