

Women At Work: Exploring Challenges Confronting Women In Professional Environments

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Abstract

Despite notable progress and increased awareness, women continue to face numerous obstacles hindering their advancement in the workplace. This research endeavors to provide a comprehensive understanding of these challenges and the strategies employed by women to overcome them. It underscores the urgent need for collective efforts to attain gender equality in professional spheres. The study employed a qualitative approach, involving interviews with 50 male and 50 female job holders from both government and non-government sectors. Additionally, focus group discussions and participatory rural appraisal techniques were used to gather insights. The analysis revealed several critical themes. The "glass ceiling" phenomenon, symbolizing invisible barriers to women's career advancement, persists across industries, driven by historical prejudices, systemic inequalities, and subtle biases. The struggle for work-life balance is a pervasive challenge, leading to stress and burnout. Coping mechanisms such as time management, social support, and self-care are crucial. Supportive work environments and addressing issues like the gender pay gap and sexual harassment are essential. Maternity and family leave policies, especially paid parental leave, are vital for gender equity. Returning to work after a career break necessitates addressing skill erosion and biases. Dual-career couples face unique challenges, often resulting in career compromises for women. Overcoming this requires shifting societal expectations and providing support for both partners. Gender stereotypes limit career choices from a young age, emphasizing the importance of breaking free from these constraints for a diverse and equitable workforce. To achieve gender equality, collective action at societal, organizational, and individual levels is imperative.

Key words: equitable workforce, Professional Environments

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I. Introduction:

In today's world, the pursuit of gender equality and the experiences of women in professional environments remain significant and ongoing concerns (<https://www.oecd.org>). Despite notable progress and heightened awareness, women still encounter a range of obstacles that impede their advancement at work. By exploring into these intricate issues, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the hurdles women face and the strategies they employ to overcome them. Ultimately, this examination underscores the pressing need for collective efforts to achieve gender equality in the professional sphere.

The population of a country plays a crucial role in driving its development forward. In Bangladesh, where half of the total population is comprised of women, it is imperative that this segment of the population progresses and is not left behind (<https://www.worldometers>). Without the advancement of women, genuine development in the country becomes unattainable. Consequently, the women's society in Bangladesh holds a pivotal role in propelling the nation towards progress. This is precisely why one of the key objectives of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is to attain gender equality and empower all women and girls (<https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals/gender>).

The overarching aim of the Sustainable Development Goals is to eradicate global hunger, poverty, and all forms of inequality. The timeframe set for achieving the SDGs spans from 2016 to 2030, with the aspiration of creating a world where people can lead fulfilling and secure lives while enjoying their fundamental rights. Nearly all countries worldwide are actively working towards meeting the SDG targets during this period, and Bangladesh is no exception (<https://sdg.gov.bd/>).

Women's empowerment is a manifestation of gender equality and is indispensable for the sustainable development of any nation. The empowerment of women is intricately linked to their participation in various spheres, including the workforce, leadership roles in society and politics, and engagement in the economy. Presently, there is a noticeable increase in women's involvement in these areas, but the progress remains unsatisfactory, especially in terms of their participation in the workforce compared to men (<https://asiafoundation.org/>).

There exist numerous factors contributing to this disparity. In particular, this paper explores into the reasons why educated women, in particular, are hesitant to enter the workforce. Ultimately, the primary objective of this article is to emphasize that achieving women's empowerment in Bangladesh necessitates not only educated women but also an educated female workforce.

II. Objectives:

By pursuing the following objectives, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issues women face in professional settings and contribute valuable insights towards promoting gender equality and empowering women in their careers.

- To identify the specific challenges and obstacles that hinder women's professional advancement and success.
- To analyze the gender disparities, biases, and stereotypes that exist in professional environments

III. Study Methods:

A qualitative method was followed for the collecting data. There were 50 male and 50 female job holders, ensuring diversity in their backgrounds, and included representatives from both government and non-government sectors. One-on-one interviews conducted with these participants to gather comprehensive qualitative data, exploring into their workplace experiences and the challenges they encountered. Focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted to foster open dialogue among participants. This encouraged the sharing of perspectives, exchange of ideas, and the exploration of common themes related to gender disparities and workplace obstacles. Participatory rural appraisal (PRA) techniques were applied to actively involve participants in discussions and collaborative problem-solving concerning gender-related issues within professional settings. Analysis process employed qualitative methods to systematically examine and interpret the data collected. This allowed us to identify recurring themes, patterns, and valuable insights. Ethical considerations were of utmost importance throughout the study. This involved obtaining informed consent from participants, guaranteeing confidentiality, and respecting their privacy and anonymity. To enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, data triangulation employed by combining insights obtained from individual interviews, group discussions, and participatory rural appraisal.

IV. Glass Ceiling and Leadership Roles:

The concept of the "glass ceiling" was introduced by Marilyn Loden, a manager at a New York telephone company, at a Women's Exposition in 1978. This term symbolizes the often invisible obstacle that hinders the advancement of many women in their professional journey. The concept of the "glass ceiling" represents an abstract hurdle shaped by institutional prejudices and societal conventions (<https://www.investopedia.com>). Loden coined this phrase nearly four decades ago, the study found yet it remains just as pertinent in today's context.

The enduring presence of the glass ceiling remains a significant issue across a wide range of industries, obstructing the advancement of numerous marginalized groups in the workplace in non-governmental than to the Government organizations. Despite increased societal recognition and initiatives aimed at tackling these obstacles, the stark truth persists: men largely occupy executive roles and hold authority within corporations and various other domains. Respondents articulated that these biases collaborate to create an imbalance that benefits male candidates, perpetuating a cycle where their qualifications are given undue weight, while the achievements of female candidates are frequently disregarded or underestimated.

As per the feedback provided by those participating in the study, the corporate world, often regarded as a space where merit-based principles could excel, still exhibits deeply rooted disparities in gender and diversity within its uppermost leadership positions. This underrepresentation of women and minorities in executive positions is not solely a product of individual choices, but rather a complex interplay of historical prejudices, systemic inequalities, and subtle biases that continue to shape recruitment, promotion, and decision-making processes. They also added the glass ceiling manifests as an invisible, yet formidable barrier, deterring qualified and talented individuals from reaching their fullest potential and contributing to a more inclusive and equitable professional environment. According to the respondents numerous factors contribute to the glass ceiling phenomenon, including societal, cultural, and individual factors. However, this study will focus on organizational factors, which include but are not limited to:

- **Gender and Racial Biases:** Prejudices and stereotypes based on gender, race, and ethnicity can result in unfair treatment and discrimination during recruitment, promotion, and decision-making processes.
- **Lack of Representation:** The lack of diverse role models in top leadership roles can create challenges for underrepresented groups in envisioning their own progress, ultimately diminishing their motivation and limiting their access to opportunities.
- **Stereotypes and Perceptions:** Societal expectations and stereotypes about traditional gender roles and abilities can influence how individuals are perceived and evaluated, affecting their career progression.
- **Networking Opportunities:** Career progression often relies heavily on informal networks and connections. Restricted entry to these networks can put individuals from marginalized backgrounds at a disadvantage.
- **Work-Life Balance:** Achieving a harmonious equilibrium between professional and family obligations can pose greater difficulties for women, potentially impacting their capacity to assume demanding leadership positions.
- **Lack of Mentorship and Sponsorship:** The lack of mentors and sponsors who actively champion and endorse individuals can impede their career advancement.
- **Organizational Culture:** Organizational cultures that do not place a premium on diversity and inclusivity can sustain inequity by neglecting to confront bias and discrimination.
- **Institutional Barriers:** Certain organizations might possess policies or practices that unintentionally impede the progress of women and minority groups, including biased performance assessments or constrained prospects for skill enhancement.
- **Inertia and Resistance to Change:** Resistance to changing established power dynamics and the prevailing norms within organizations can pose challenges when it comes to confronting and eradicating the glass ceiling.

To shatter the glass ceiling, respondents pinpoint several key factors:

- **Inclusive Policies and Practices:** It is essential to enact policies that prioritize diversity and inclusivity, which encompass the revision of recruitment procedures, providing parental leave, and establishing flexible work options.
- **Leadership Development Programs:** Allocating resources to leadership development initiatives tailored for female employees can boost their competencies, self-assurance, and prominence. These programs should center on cultivating a talent pool of capable women leaders.
- **Diversity Training and Awareness:** Compulsory diversity training has the potential to mitigate unconscious biases and elevate understanding of gender-related obstacles. This training should encompass all tiers of the organization.
- **Transparent Performance Evaluation:** Performance assessments should adhere to transparency and rely on objective benchmarks, reducing the impact of subjective biases. Consistent feedback and goal establishment can assist women in monitoring their advancement.
- **Accountability and Reporting:** Organizations ought to establish well-defined diversity objectives and routinely disclose their advancements. Holding leadership responsible for attaining these objectives can propel substantial transformation.

V. Work-Life Balance and Well-being:

Working women respondents often encounter significant challenges in juggling their professional responsibilities with their personal lives, a complex and multifaceted issue that can have far-reaching consequences. The constant effort to strike a balance between work and personal life can lead to increased stress and anxiety. Balancing the pursuit of career success with fulfilling traditional household and caregiving roles can exact a toll on their mental and physical well-being. The lack of adequate support systems, such as affordable childcare and flexible work arrangements, can exacerbate these challenges. As a result, many working women experience burnout, which can manifest as exhaustion, emotional strain, and a decline in overall health.

The impact of this balance, or lack thereof, on their mental health is evident in higher levels of stress and the potential for the development of mental health issues like depression and anxiety. Physically, the struggle to balance these responsibilities can lead to sleep deprivation, poor eating habits, and a lack of exercise, contributing to various health problems. Additionally, strained personal relationships, both with partners and children, can result from the inability to allocate sufficient time and energy to family life.

To cope with these challenges respondents mentioned that working women often employ various strategies. Time management becomes crucial, as they attempt to maximize their efficiency at work and home. Many also rely on social support networks, such as friends and family, for assistance with childcare or household tasks. Embracing self-care practices, such as exercise and meditation, can help reduce stress.

Moreover, advocating for workplace policies that promote work-life balance, like flexible working hours and remote work options, is another essential coping mechanism. In some cases, working women may choose to reevaluate their career choices or seek more supportive work environments to achieve a more sustainable balance.

The finding shows that the struggle to balance professional responsibilities with personal lives is a pervasive issue for working women, with far-reaching implications for their mental and physical well-being. The impact can be detrimental, leading to stress, burnout, and strained relationships. Coping mechanisms such as time management, social support, self-care, and advocating for workplace change are essential tools that many women employ to navigate this challenging terrain and strive for a healthier work-life balance. Addressing these challenges through supportive policies and societal changes is crucial to ensure the well-being and success of working women in today's workforce.

VI. Workplace Support Systems:

Respondents are wondering why, despite global discussions about progress and creating an environment of equal treatment for all, there seems disconnect when it comes to women's rights. They're asking why women are expected to juggle both work and home life while men are seen mainly as family breadwinners. Although there are supportive men who champion women's causes, the term "feminism" is frequently met with hostility and disdain.

It's time to change this by challenging outdated ideas about what it means to be a man and helping people understand that feminism isn't about hating men but about making things fair for everyone. Feminism aims to close the gap between men and women in areas like jobs, money, personal life, and how we treat each other.

In the workplace, respondents have pinpointed certain concerns that include the gender pay gap, instances of sexual harassment, and inadequacies in restroom and transportation amenities.

VII. Maternity and Family Leave Policies:

The respondents pointed out that the Bangladesh government enforces a 6-month maternity leave policy. Nevertheless, specific sectors like the garment industry might be reluctant to handle the workload when an employee is absent, which poses difficulties for parents striving to balance work and childcare duties. Furthermore, in addition to the natural challenges of childbirth and raising children, many mothers are at risk of developing postnatal depression.

Assessing the impact of maternity and family leave policies across different industries within the country reveals their effectiveness in shaping women's choices regarding career breaks, reentry into the workforce, and their overall career paths. Respondents unanimously endorsed the value of comprehensive family leave policies that encompass paid parental leave and offer assistance to caregivers. Such policies have the potential to mitigate the obstacles confronting working women as they navigate the demands of both their careers and family duties. By promoting a healthier work-life balance, these policies play a pivotal role in retaining female employees who might otherwise depart from the workforce due to caregiving responsibilities.

VIII. Return to Work After a Career Break:

While on an extended career break, particularly following maternity leave, female employees often encounter skill erosion or face the challenge of their previous skills becoming outdated due to technological advancements. Consequently, they may find it challenging to remain competitive in the workplace. Respondents further emphasized that certain employers exhibit biases against individuals who have taken career breaks, presuming that their dedication or skillsets have decreased. These biases act as barriers, impeding opportunities for professionals seeking to re-enter the workforce. Therefore individuals may face feelings of self-doubt and low self-esteem, making it harder to re-enter the workforce with confidence.

IX. Dual-Career Couples:

Dual-career couples pose distinctive challenges for women. Juggling the demands of a career alongside family responsibilities can be particularly taxing for females in such relationships. The pressure to effectively handle both household duties and professional roles often results in elevated stress levels and an increased risk of burnout. Furthermore, in certain instances, women find themselves making career compromises, including opting for part-time employment or accepting roles with reduced responsibilities, in order to accommodate their partner's career pursuits. Regrettably, these compromises hinder their prospects for long-term career advancement and income growth.

X. Career Choices and Stereotypes:

Society often imposes gender stereotypes that influence the types of careers individuals are expected to pursue. For example, there's a longstanding stereotype that certain fields, like nursing or teaching, are more suitable for women, while others, like engineering or technology, are considered more appropriate for men. These stereotypes discourage individuals from pursuing careers that do not align with their gender. Gender stereotypes lead to bias in the hiring process. Employers unconsciously favor candidates who fit traditional gender roles for a particular profession. This can result in fewer opportunities for individuals who challenge these stereotypes. Stereotypes can shape individuals' career aspirations from a young age. For instance, if a young girl grows up believing that certain science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields are not for her, she would not pursue these subjects in school and miss out on related career opportunities. Gender stereotypes limit career choices. Some individuals feel pressured to conform to societal expectations, even if their true passions and skills lie in other fields. Many individuals strive to break free from gender stereotypes and pursue careers that challenge traditional norms. This is empowering but come with additional hurdles and resistance from society or colleagues.

XI. Conclusion:

In conclusion, the challenges surrounding gender equality and women's rights in the workplace persist due to deeply ingrained societal norms and organizational structures. The concept of the "glass ceiling" symbolizes the invisible barriers that hinder women's career advancement, rooted in historical prejudices, systemic inequalities, and subtle biases. Addressing these issues necessitates inclusive policies, leadership development for women, and diversity training.

The struggle for work-life balance is a pressing concern, leading to stress and burnout. Coping mechanisms like time management, social support, and self-care are essential. Supportive work environments and addressing issues like the gender pay gap and sexual harassment are crucial.

Maternity and family leave policies need to be comprehensive, including paid parental leave, to ensure gender equity. Returning to work after a career break requires addressing skill erosion and biases.

In dual-career couples, women often make career sacrifices, highlighting the need for shifting societal expectations and support for both partners. Gender stereotypes limit career choices from a young age, emphasizing the importance of breaking free from these constraints for a diverse and equitable workforce.

To achieve gender equality, collective action at societal, organizational, and individual levels is essential. The goal is a future where all individuals, regardless of gender, have equal opportunities in the professional world.

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