

# ***Empowering Women Academics in a Global Society: the Glass Ceiling***

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## **Introduction**

Statistics reveal that there is persistent discrimination against women in the job market in spite of present legislation on equality between men and women in Europe. In Switzerland, more than half of women are gainfully employed. In business, six out of ten are still in a subordinate position, and only 1% have made it to the top. The situation overall is the the same in Europe, whereas in the United States, the number of women in high-level positions has increased rapidly in the last decades (11.2 %). The reasons why women find it difficult to reach these positions are not specific to the business world. They also apply to many other fields such as academics, administration, politics, communications or art.

What barriers do women encounter when they try to reach higher positions?

According to Wikipedia, the term "glass ceiling" was originally coined by Carol Hymowitz and Timothy Schellhardt in the March 24, 1986 edition of the [Wall Street Journal](#) to describe a hidden phenomenon:

The term **glass ceiling** refers to the observation that top-level management in businesses consists predominantly, if not exclusively, of a certain demographic (e.g., white heterosexual men). A "ceiling" is suggested because persons outside the dominant demographic group are supposedly limited in how far they are able to advance inside the organization ranks; the ceiling is "glass" (transparent) because the limitation is not immediately apparent. The "glass ceiling" is distinguished from formal barriers to advancement, such as education or experience requirements. The existence of the glass ceiling is frequently cited as a failure of existing anti-discrimination action. **We interviewed twenty women, all of whom hold university degrees, about their personal experience and views on the "glass ceiling". We then made a comprehensive summary of their answers and set them in a general context. We do not claim to have made a rigorous scientific study; our intention was primarily to draw attention to the issues involved and open the discussion on the glass ceiling.**

## Career

We asked the women we interviewed to describe their actual position, changes in their career and whether they thought they had achieved the position they had hoped for.

Half of them had remained in their initial profession and had progressed in the same field. The other half had experienced major changes in their career. The majority of these women had never thought that they would reach the level of their present position.

They described the obstacles they had encountered in their careers as follows:

1. financial problems and low wages (e.g. in the academic world salaries are low at the beginning, and there are few stable positions);
2. lack of self-confidence;
3. many women seem to have difficulty distinguishing between external obstacles (cultural, social, structural) and internal obstacles (psychological). Women often feel guilty and think that they are responsible for the difficult situations they experience, when in fact there may be other hidden reasons.
4. jealousy and negative attitude of superiors;
5. mobility;
6. the fact that their husband or partner would not share the household tasks;
7. lack of available part-time positions both for men and women.

How did these women overcome the obstacles they had to face in their careers?  
We received the following answers:

1. motivation;
2. support from husband, family and other women;
3. encouragement to accept new challenges;
4. support by influential people;
5. the wisdom to decline offers that could lead to a dead end or to failure.

## **Role Models**

We asked the participants in our study if they have been rebellious or rather conventional as young girls.

Most claimed not to have been rebellious in their youth. However, a few clearly declared that they had indeed been so. Since a number of these women had a rebellious attitude later on in life, we can deduce that they were unconscious rebels. One woman explained that she began her studies as a challenge to her ex-husband, others had similar feelings with respect to their fathers or professors. Some of them noticed very early on that women in their milieu did not have an interesting life, and they were aware that they did not want to have the same lifestyle.

The politicians we interviewed mentioned living models, among whom the present President of Switzerland, Micheline Calmy-Rey. One of them had a feminist grandmother. Some other models came from readings (George Sand, Gisèle Halimi, Hannah Arendt, Edgar Morin). Surprisingly, many were unable to think of models. One of them even expressed regret at not having had a model for her career in the business world since she came from a family of teachers. It was obvious from our survey that there are not very many role models available in some male-dominated fields.

## **Crucial Events for their Careers**

We asked these persons what specific character traits and psychological qualities were necessary for women to achieve high positions, and we received the following answers:

1. self-confidence;
2. determination;
3. working very hard, having great energy and ambition;
4. being able to accept criticism;
5. efficient organization;
6. mobility;
7. being able to defend oneself;
8. using political strategies, knowing human nature and how to create coalitions;
9. visibility, being exposed, knowing how to sell oneself professionally;
10. knowing how to gain the support of influential persons (particularly men in high positions);

11. knowing how to create and use networks;
12. knowing how to gain men's respect;
13. using feminines attributes to gain men's admiration;
14. having charm, good social and communication skills;
15. abide by the male code of conduct (a professional and neutral attitude and gestures);
16. to have the courage not to be „nice“;
17. the importance of appearance, image (in the academic world women scientists were expected not to care about their appearance until recently).

We should mention that one participant said that she had been greatly helped by her father, her brother and her husband, and had therefore not experienced the glass ceiling personally. Two other women, one of them a protestant minister and the other a judge, also felt that there was no glass ceiling in their respective professions at their level.

### **Professional Strategies**

We asked the women we interviewed whether they had understood the rules of the game in their professional milieu.

Most of them had the impression of having understood them. However, many said the opposite, or that they had understood these rules when it was too late. Two of them emphasized the fact that when they had understood the rules, they had not necessarily played by them.

A politician said that she had really understood the rules of the game in politics when she was not re-elected, and then she started consciously building networks. Another former politician said that politics was made *by and for* men. The political game, in her view, is a male model. In order to succeed you have to “kill the opponent”, take over territory symbolically (including verbally).

Others spoke of combining feminine charm, social and diplomatic skills (at which women excel) with determination.

Last but not least, we asked these women if they had had a clear career plan at the beginning, and they all said no.

## **A Feminist Perspective**

All women interviewed said that there was no real solidarity among women and were disappointed.

One mother said that women would help each other out in situations where there was no power at stake (including symbolic territory), such as babysitting.

Almost all of them stressed the importance of women's networks.

We asked them whether the situation of women had progressed or if there was a backlash. From the answers we received, it was felt that there had been great progress in the last 30 years, but at the same time that there was a hidden backlash which could be dangerous.

## **Advice to Young Women**

Our final question was what advice would these persons give a young woman today.

1. To be true to oneself (personal ethics).
2. Look for an influential mentor.
3. Discuss career plans very early with husband or partner.
4. Refuse a position that would lead nowhere or to failure.
5. Choose a liberal career.
6. Follow your dream and try not to be influenced by stereotypes.
7. Revalorize traditional women's professions.
8. Experienced women should explain obstacles and difficulties related to a particular milieu clearly and tell young women not to be naive (that is they should face reality and look at people realistically)
9. Leave the country.

## **Conclusion**

We would like to draw the following general conclusions from the twenty case studies we have examined.

Men and women have a different perception of what a career is. Men tend to define themselves by their profession, which is not necessarily the case for women. In general, women do not identify with their position to the same extent.

Men equate their career with success, power, status and money, whereas women want personal satisfaction and compatibility with family and leisure.

The women we interviewed noted that many of the qualities mentioned as essential to break the glass ceiling also applied to men.

Based on this study, we would like to put forward the following ideas. In addition to the qualities considered necessary to reach a high level position, two other factors come into play:

- understanding the rules of the game in the professional milieu at the outset;
- making a conscious effort to build and use networks.

In our conclusion, we would also like to draw attention to structural obstacles such as learning to refuse "attractive positions" that lead nowhere or eventually to failure. (Glass walls, transparency). We would like to refer to our previous study presented in 2004 at the 28th Triennial Conference in Perth in which we analyzed such a structural problem in the Canada Research Chairs Program (CRC). We then said that "networking at all levels, i.e. between generations and on a voluntary and institutional basis, is crucial to achieve progress" in the academic world.

In our present study, concern was voiced by several mothers that young girls today are subjected to great pressure regarding their physical appearance. The danger of focussing exclusively on marriage and children in this age of divorces, and the risk of ending up in poverty without having a career plan was also mentioned.

We would like to take this opportunity to remind our members that our Association is a women's international network dedicated to promote peace and women's status.

We have found the discussion with the participants so interesting that we hope that this study will be a stepping stone to further research on the glass ceiling.