In the Shackles of
Stereotypes . . .
Even Today

WALK THE TALK

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A few years ago, as we came out of a meeting called to discuss the proposed reorganization of some departments at the corporate headquarters of Oil India Limited, two of my colleagues from other functions and myself, all women, lingered near the elevator discussing the ramifications of the action plan proposed in the meeting before heading out to our respective offices. Just then the elevator stopped and our Chairman stepped out, looked at the three of us and smilingly said, "I can see that a great shopping expedition is getting planned." He laughed and walked off. We all joined him in laughter as his comment was meant to be light hearted. However, after the laughter died down, we all had a similar reaction. We looked at each other, and we were thinking the same thing. We felt crushed, wondering if that's all a group of women is supposed to be talking about. Does our bandwidth begin and end with shopping, babies, and domestic issues?

At the end of the day, it did not matter what we were actually talking about. What mattered was our Chairman's assumption: the casual assumption which was not acknowledged or even examined. In all fairness, he is not the only one. We do it all the time, because we are not even conscious of how we evaluate and judge others or what assumptions we hold about them. It can, therefore, be

manifested in a variety of ways, sometimes functional and sometimes dysfunctional.

Admittedly, this kind of stereotypical thinking is not limited to gender, but extends to age, community, disciplines, etc.

Such thinking is based on certain assumptions. Assumptions, in turn, are based on certain ideas or biases that we hold about others who are different from us and which affect our behavior towards them. It is often easier to see this bias in others than being conscious of the bias we ourselves hold. Often, being different from the majority group automatically implies an inability to perform; a difference not in the positive sense, but as a question mark on one's attitude, competence, exposure, etc.

Interestingly, however, we think of them as facts, not assumptions or stereotypes. They can simply be subconscious and subtle prejudices deeply ingrained in our psyche about how certain groups of people act or think, without the necessary validation of how they actually act or think! These prejudices are sometimes so subtle that their impact on our behavior is not recognized by us. Impulses that trigger reaction or overreaction are the offshoots of our prejudices. It is not as much the provocation from the other side, but the reactions we have due to our own prejudices.

Although it is true that such prejudices are far more loosely held than they once were, they have certainly not vanished. If anything, they have become less visible. They cause old, traditional forms of behavior to surface time and again. Understanding and recognizing one's very beliefs and how they affect one's behavior and decisions, is a transformational process that cannot help but positively affect how one works through other issues of diversity.

Gender Stereotyping and Its Impact on Women's Careers

In the last two decades, women's improved education and increasingly delayed marriage and childbearing have created a pool of qualified women available for professional and managerial jobs worldwide. At

the same time, the growth of the public sector and services and the introduction of equality laws and policies in many countries have provided opportunities for qualified women to occupy lower- and middle-level management posts. These changes have paved the way for their taking up and aspiring for more management positions. However, women's professional training and the predicted shortages of highly qualified managers have not resulted in women obtaining top executive positions in significant numbers.

Encountering Glass Ceilings and Walls

Large companies and organizations mirror societal patterns. It is a common observation that where women have managed to reach high-level managerial positions, these are often restricted to those in areas less central or strategic to the organization such as human resources, administration, public relations, or corporate social responsibility.

"Glass ceiling" is a term coined by the *Wall Street Journal* in the 1970s in the United States to describe the invisible artificial barriers created by attitudinal and organizational prejudices which bar women from top executive jobs or other leadership positions [1]. Governments, enterprises, labor and women's organizations have provided much impetus, analysis and plans of implementation for overcoming attitudinal and institutional discrimination that hinder women's career development. Yet for many the results fall far short of expectations. The glass ceiling is still encountered depending on the extent to which women's entry into organizations is permitted: it may be higher or lower, closer to the corporate head, or at the middle management level, or even below them. If the term "glass ceiling" well illustrates the point that there is no objective reason preventing women from rising to the very top like men, other than the inherent discrimination in organizational structures and processes, it is also equally difficult for women to move laterally into strategic areas such as product development, marketing, corporate finance, and then upwards through the central pathways to key executive positions in the pyramidal structure characteristic of large corporations. These

The Glass Ceiling and the Glass Wall in the Organizational Pyramid
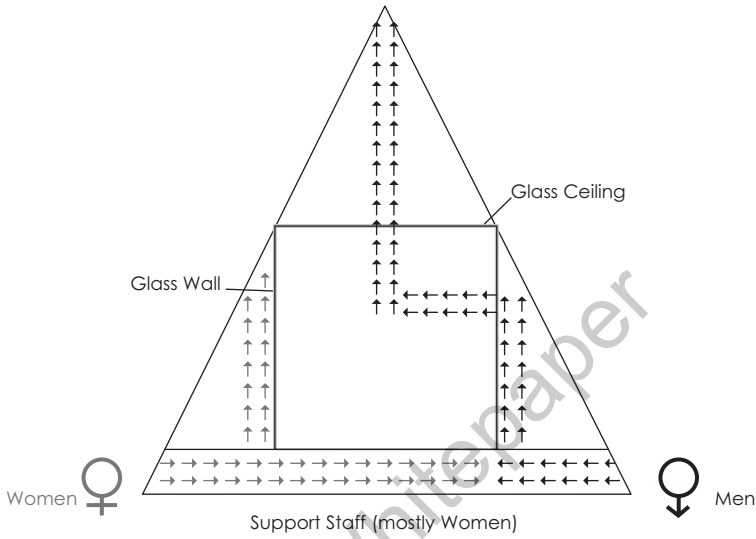
Source: Adapted from Wirth, Linda, *Breaking Through the Glass Ceiling: Women in Management*, Geneva: ILO, 2001.

barriers can be called "glass walls," through which you can see but cannot enter without creating a great deal of noise and a good deal of mess.

The glass wall can be encountered anytime, anywhere, and in any profession. It could be encountered at the entry point, even when women graduates possess the necessary qualifications as advertised and required by the job, but are not taken due to unspoken assumptions about lack of mobility, the prospect of marriage, etc. After selection and completion of probation, they can be encountered once again when assignments or placements are given (She is good but will company clients accept a woman engineer?) Having managed to go through these walls, women encounter another wall when it comes to promotions. In dual-career families, often women have to decide to stay put in the same place of posting for one or

two years due to family responsibilities such as children undertaking critical examinations, etc. Then, the question arises: "How can I promote her if she cannot move to another city?" In fact, occasionally a senior manager may learn his first lesson about equality or lack of it when his daughter does not get a promotion despite good performance, or when he does not want her to work for a company that has lower expectations for women.

These walls that eventually become the glass ceiling, whether in the workplace or in politics, are essentially a reflection of social and economic gender inequality. With the achievement of educational parity along with changing social attitudes, it was somehow assumed that women would quickly move up the career ladder. This is proving hard to achieve, especially close to the top where the sheer prevalence of male executives tends to perpetuate the glass ceiling. Women, at times, also find themselves without the right mix of corporate experience required for top executive positions.

Breaking through the glass ceiling is not an event at a fixed point in time or a designated level in career, beyond which progress is impossible. In fact, it is a series of events in the careers of women professionals, from recruitment to placements to promotion to development. It is, in fact, a cumulative outcome of attitudinal, cultural, and organizational biases at work. Women and organizations, on occasion, may take a long time to understand this. Once understood, a systematic enterprise-level approach addressing all existing barriers is necessary for women to break through them. As examples show, some women have broken the glass ceiling at least some of the time. A small number of women have become CEOs of large corporations, presidents or deans of universities, ministers in cabinets, and governors or secretaries of states. However, women in powerful positions are still rare. The glass ceiling seems to exist even today, because our cultural norms concerning the proper role of women in society have colored the organizational norms. The traditional roles associated with men and women have walked into corporate life.

Anjali Hazarika is the author of the award-winning book Daring to Dream: Cultivating Corporate Creativity Through Dreamwork published by SAGE (1998). On the basis of extensive research, Anjali developed a unique program of rediscovering creativity through dreams, with a focus on developing individual/organizational creativity and innovation. This has been introduced to executives from diverse sectors and government institutions in India and around the world in Denmark, Switzerland, South Africa, the UK, and the US. She has been the Honorary Vice President (APAC) of the International Association for the Study of Dreams, USA. She has been invited for addressing the annual conferences of the International Association for the Study of Dreams the annual conference of the International Association of Process Oriented Psychology, Switzerland; and the World Congress of the International Federation of

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competitive. She has edited six monographs on various burning themes related to petroleum industry. She is also the recipient of a special award for Promoting Managerial Excellence: the National Petroleum Management Programme (NPMP) Award for Excellence under the aegis of the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, Government of India.

An Executive Coach in private practice, Anjali has helped in navigating the strategic leadership challenges of high-potential senior executives and board-level leaders belonging to various industry sectors. She is also an Associate Coach with the Center for Creative Leadership (APAC). Anjali is invited as an independent expert to the Steering Committee and the Advisory Council of the Center for Innovations in Public Systems, an autonomous body set up by the Government of India to identify and promote innovations in state governments through a variety of initiatives. Anjali holds a doctorate in management and two postgraduate degrees in psychology and the social sciences. Actively involved with research-based advocacy on women's leadership issues at workplaces, she offers workshops that develop new skills and strategies for change. She co-founded the Forum for Women in Public Sector, set up under the aegis of the Standing Conference of Public Enterprises, New Delhi, and has been its President.