ABSTRACT

GLASS CEILING FOR WOMEN IN THE IT SECTOR:
A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY IN KARNATAKA

The information revolution is an ongoing series of transformative changes that have altered the nature of social relationships and indeed our ways of seeing and understanding the world. As the predominant sector of the economy the IT sector being a knowledge sector has created a knowledge economy. And, the premise of a knowledge economy would be that the possessor of and contributor to knowledge – man or woman – would prevail over and above all else. On this premise the IT sector would logically afford a non-discriminatory workplace regime. Paradoxically though, in this sector the term glass ceiling is frequently employed to designate the stunted career growth of women professionals.

The present research has tried to examine in detail this paradox. Glass ceiling is usually defined as an invisible barrier that prevents women from reaching the top in their jobs. The research examines the existence and locates the origins of the glass ceiling inequality in the IT sector. The research articulates the political term glass ceiling into the classical sociological concept of the social fact. When glass ceiling is rendered as a social fact it can be studied through externally observable objective criteria without having to succumb to popular perceptions or populist agenda. The study is located in the state of Karnataka. Karnataka has been chosen as the case in point due to its unique placement in the context of the development of the IT sector in India. Since the 1980s Karnataka started emerging as a forerunner in information technology. As a leading state in the field of Indian industry particularly in the area of high technology industries, Karnataka presented an apposite choice for examining the glass ceiling inequality. Bangalore in particular is widely regarded as the ‘Silicon Valley’ of India. An eclectic sample of 510 IT professionals in Bangalore and Mysore selected through a stimulating process of network analysis was intensively surveyed for the purpose of gathering data. In addition personal interviews were also conducted with many among these. Data so collected has been meticulously analysed to examine for the presence of glass ceiling as a social fact and then to locate the reasons for its
existence. In addition the research also studies engineering college students to explore the deeper origins of the phenomenon of glass ceiling through interview survey of 104 final semester students of computer engineering in Mysore poised at the threshold of their IT careers.

Together these data have yielded thought provoking findings. The study shows conclusively that glass ceiling inequality is deeply entrenched in the domain of work in the information technology sector. As a social fact glass ceiling displays a consistency and regularity that transcends organisational and cultural boundaries. The glass ceiling emerges as a complex of constructs that cannot be comprehended at mundane levels of causal attribution. It requires a certain ‘inter-subjectivity’ to capture the essence of disadvantage that a woman has to endure in what is reputedly a merit based work culture.

The research shows that while formal institutional structures do not support glass ceiling yet the underlying structures that form the bedrock of the social order have encrusted indelible imprints of inequality on all social relationships including those generated in the context of work. Although organisations do not advocate discriminatory policy there exists a parallel universe of discrimination even within a knowledge organisation inhabited by the actors – men and women – as individuals and constituted of their own world views as members of an androcentric social order. Even as women graduates enter the industry they are already cautious about their future abilities to secure a balance in their multiple role expectations. Women are palpably aware of their ‘feminine’ role expectations and this awareness contributes an added dimension to that universe of disadvantage. The existentialist feminist philosophy has provided the epistemological framework for the analysis of this inequality. For, in the ultimate analysis glass ceiling is essentially a fragment in the deeper woman’s question.