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# Women in Management Research: Theoretical Perspectives

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this literature review is to analyze the different theoretical approaches in female leadership in the global arena. The literature review comprises peer-reviewed journal articles, white papers, conference proceedings and institutional reports by multilateral organizations on the topic of women in management and career barriers for women. Firstly, we examine the theory of Fagenson, and afterward biological models, socialization models, and structural/cultural models in an organization will be discussed.

**Key Words:** Women in Management, Gender Organization System, GOS,

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# **Women in Management Research: Theoretical Perspectives**

## **Introduction:**

Women's advancement in management career can be influenced by the individual factors within the person, organizational factors which are located within the organization, and societal and systemic factors (Fagenson, 1990). Cultural and social attitudes towards what constitutes "male" or "female" jobs result in occupational segregation, although the extent of the problem varies from country to country and from job to job. It is important to keep in mind that there are important institutional differences between countries, notably regarding their educational and academic systems. (Women in management, Update 2004,)

Women face greater barriers and rely on strategies for advancement that are different from those of their male counterparts (Lyness and Thompson, 2000). Discrimination against women manifests itself in various forms, including: job segregation, wage gaps, sexual harassment, the denial of career development opportunities (including mentoring and poor performance evaluations), and a lack of promotion opportunities. Being a woman and working outside of the home calls for additional education about sex and gender biases and alertness to the reality of workplace inequity. Additionally, working mothers are stereotyped as not being serious or reliable enough to take positions as managers because their priorities lean more towards raising a family; this is often presented as an either/or argument, effectively advancing the myth that successful executives are unable to manage multiple priorities.

Research on women in management has become a significant field of study within the last twenty years (Kanter, 1977; Larwood & Wood, 1977; Nieva & Gutek, 1981; Powell, 1988). The first question could be asked: Can women be managers? Why are there few women in top management? The second question emerged: Do male and female managers different attitude in organizations? Differentiations between the attitudes and behaviors of men and women in managerial positions were salient topics found in this literature (Powell, 1988; Henning & Jardim, 1977; Terborg, 1977; O'Leary, 1974; Schein, 1973). Emphasis was on comparative research studies and female managers could only be understood in comparison to male managers (Galas and Smircich, 1989).

The purpose of this study and literature review is to compare the theories views about gaps in female leadership in the global arena. The literature review comprises peer-reviewed journal articles, white papers, conference proceedings and institutional reports by multilateral organizations on the topic of career barriers for women. The study examined the theoretical approaches in the field of women in management and barriers to women's participation in global leadership.

### **1. Gender –Centered Perspective**

The gender-centered and organization structure perspectives are traditionally embraced by researchers to comprehend why women are underrepresented in top management positions (Fagenson, 1990). Researchers adopting the gender-centered perspective, which assumes that

woman's traits and behavior, are 'inappropriate' for top management positions, do not consider organizational or societal factors to be relevant to their analysis.

Women, in contrast (although consistent with female socialization practices), have been conditioned to give greater weight to their personal/family lives than to their careers, value peers over their jobs and to feel little commitment to their organizations (Fagenson, 1986; Hennig and Jardim, 1977; Kanter, 1977; Reitz and Jewell, 1978; Treiman and Terrel, 1975). Whereas high-level individuals have been rewarded for securing power, women, in contrast have been conditioned to reject power (Fagenson, 1986; Kanter, 1977).

According to the gender-centered perspective, also referred to as the person-centered view, women's behavior and limited representation in upper level jobs is attributed to factors that are internal to women, e.g., their inappropriate traits, cognitions, attitudes and behaviors (Fagenson, 1986; Harragan, 1977; Homer, 1972; Putnam and Heinen, 1976; Riger and Galligan, 1980; Terborg, 1977). According to this perspective, women have been socialized to possess characteristics that are in conflict with the demands of the managerial role and are antithetical to their being promoted to the upper ranks of their organizations (Fagenson, 1986; Harragan, 1977; Homer, 1972; O'Leary, 1974; Riger and Galligan, 1980; Schein, 1973, 1975).

Furthermore, successful managers' performance is believed to be due to "internal" factors, e.g., their abilities and efforts (Fagenson, 1986). Yet, women, attribute their work performance to "external factors," such as luck and task ease (Ayers-Nachamkin et al, 1982; Deaux and Farris, 1974; Fagenson, 1986). These attributions are consistent with women's own performance expectations and ability self-assessments: they have a relatively low level of self-confidence (Lenney, 1977; Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974).

Gender-centered theorists have attributed these differences between the sexes and the "common heritages, beliefs and assumptions" (Hennig and Jardim, 1977) within each sex to a variety of causes including: differential sex-role socialization (Hennig and Jardim, 1977) differential gender identity formation (Chodrow, 1978) and to the different ways boys and girls construct reality (Gilligan, 1982).

A major problem with the gender-centered perspective is its dependency on sex role characteristics in "defining" appropriate behaviors of managers. Sex roles are conceptualized as immutable and not subject to change. The gender-centered perspective creates simplified, binary categories that mask the complexity of the meaning of gender in organizations (Bell & Nkomo, 1992). In this approach an implied hierarchical relationship exists between men and women with one gender dominant and superior, and the other (women) subordinate and inferior (Scott, 1988) . Often tautological explanations emerge within this perspective. For example, when researchers find differences between men and women in their work, the next logical question is the "why" of the differences. This can result in an explanation that essentially says "because men and women are different".

Proponents of the gender-centered approach have identified women's fear of success as an important factor inhibiting women's advancement into top management positions (Horner, 1972). Hence, it is argued that women's limited progression into the managerial ranks can be

attributed to factors internal to women, such as traits, attitudes and behavior that are argued to be inappropriate for senior level positions (Fagenson, 1990, 1993; Horner, 1972; Riger & Galligan, 1980; Parker & Fagenson, 1994). The solution for women is to act and behave like men in organizations (Omar & Davidson, 2001). This perspective on its own is not adequate to explain why there are few women in top management positions especially when research findings have found women's progress in organizations remained slow even in situations where women are as qualified as men (Cleveland et al., 2000).

The basic premise of the gender-centered theory, i.e., that males and females are basically different, underlies much of the research that has been conducted in the field of women in management. The research methodology commonly used to test the gender-centered notion includes sex as the independent variable and behavioral, cognitive, personality and attitudinal measures as the dependent variables. The responses on the dependent variables are typically elicited from the men and women under study (Schneider, 1983). T-tests are typically applied to examine whether a person's gender exerts a significant effect on the dependent variable (Schneider, 1983). A significant  $t$  value for the gender variable is interpreted as support for the gender-centered view.

Part of this perspective is the notion that the token presence of women in managerial positions has contributed to gender stereotyping. Therefore, the sex differences between men and women can be explained by their different proportional representation and position in the organizational hierarchy.

## **2. Organization-Structure perspective**

The organization structure perspective is based on the premise that organization structures shape women's behavior on the job (Fagenson, 1990, 1993). According to Kanter (1977), there are 'advantageous' and 'disadvantageous' job situations. Advantageous positions, which offer job incumbents power and opportunities, are held by individuals whose gender is in the majority (that is, males). Disadvantageous positions, on the other hand, offer job occupants little power and fewer opportunities, and are held by individuals whose social category is few in number (that is, females). Individuals in advantageous positions develop attitudes and behavior that help them to accelerate, while those in disadvantageous positions develop attitudes and behavior that reflect and justify their job situations, which offer limited advancement (Fagenson, 1990).

Kanter (1977) argued that it is because women are traditionally placed in low level positions in organizational hierarchies that feminine traits shape their behavior. Informal power and opportunity structures in organizations serve to exclude women. If women were placed in high level jobs, they would exhibit the behaviors that men have exhibited in those positions (Kanter, 1977; Riger and Galligan, 1980).

On the other hand, proponents of the organization structure perspective assume that the culture and characteristics of the organization shape women's behavior and provide greater opportunities for men, and that the person and the structure are independent factors (Fagenson, 1990).

According to this perspective, it is argued that the differences between men and women in their attitudes and behavior are due to the differences in the opportunity and power structures in organizations rather than to gender (Kanter, 1977). As noted previously, the gender-centered perspective has been criticized for disregarding situational variables (Fagenson, 1993), whilst the organization structure perspective for failing to control for factors other than the structure of the organization (Martin et al., 1983)

Most importantly, the organization structure approach assumes that the person and the structure are independent factors. As argued by Bowers (1973, p. 3) "situations are as much a function of the person as the person's behavior is a function of the situation." Schneider (1983) noted that because people tend to locate themselves in environments that are compatible with their own behavioral tendencies the two cannot be separated. It therefore follows that if people foster environments that are consistent with their own inclinations, those environments will be similar to, not separable from, the people in them (Schneider, 1983).

The structural change advocated is not a basic questioning of underlying extant power and hierarchical systems but the placing of women in pre-existing structures and relationships (Galas & Smircich, 1989). There is also an implicit assumption that women are unable to influence or decisively impact the organizations in which they work (Gerson, 1985). Given the theoretical shortcomings of earlier work on women in management, it is important to adopt a wider and more holistic approach.

The organization-structure perspective, Its primary focus on organization structure overlooks the saliency of other important organizational factors including norms and culture, policies, training systems, promotion, and reward systems (Fagenson, 1990; Gregory, 1990). The solution to women's plight in organizations would simply be to replace men with women in senior level positions. Then gender stereotyping and sexism would dissipate. The major deficiency of the organization-structure perspective is its acceptance of the status quo.

### **3. Gender-Organization-System(GOS)**

A third perspective is the gender–organization–system (GOS) perspective, a systems-oriented approach (Fagenson, 1993), which recognizes the simultaneous interaction between the person, the organization and the society. The gender–organization–system perspective incorporates the propositions and arguments of both the gender centered and organization structure perspectives (Fagenson, 1990). However, this perspective suggests that the limited advancement of women in organizations is not due either to their gender (gender-centered perspective) or to the organization structure (organization structure perspective), but that both jointly influence and shape women's behavior at work.

The gender–organization–system perspective further contends that women's behavior is an outcome of both their gender and the organization structure (Fagenson & Horowitz, 1985). The perspective also builds on the concept of organization structure to include not only power, job situations, and the number of individuals that shape and define women's behavior in organizations, but also takes into account organizational variables such as corporate

culture, history, ideology, and policies (Martin et al., 1983). According to this broader concept of organization structure, the under-representation of women in management positions may be due to the social and institutional systems in which organizations function.

The gender–organization–system perspective supports the basic premise of the gender-centered perspective that women possess characteristics that are argued to be incompatible with key managerial roles (Fagenson, 1986; Harragan, 1977; Horner, 1972). Women have been socialized to possess ‘feminine traits’ such as warmth, kindness, selflessness (Feather, 1984; Putnam & Heinen, 1976; Schein, 1973; Spence & Helmreich, 1978), while the profile of a promotable manager is that of an individual who is aggressive, forceful, rational, competitive, decisive, strong, self-confident and independent (Putnam & Heinen, 1976; Schein, 1973).

The Gender Organization System (GOS) framework provides a holistic approach to study the issues relating to women’s managerial advancement (Jabeen 2001). The framework emphasizes the need for reviewing personal, organizational and societal or systemic factors (Jacobson, 1995, Jabeen 2001). However, GOS approach is the most useful theoretical framework for women in management research (Omar & Davidson, 2001). This perspective argues that behavior in organizations can be understood as an interaction between gender, situations, and the social–institutional system in which these interactions take place (Martin et al., 1983).

Many variables i.e. societal and institutional practices, expectations and stereotypes regarding roles of women and men in society can affect the structures and organizational progressions (Martin et al., 1983). These variables can also influence and be influenced by women’s attitudes and behavior at work (Fagenson, 1990). According to Yukongdi and Benson (2005) the fundamental statement of a number of theories is that culture does not transform, but remains fixed. But societies have experienced shifts in values regarding the role of women and the concept of gender equality (Yukongdi and Benson 2005).

Factors such as cultural values, societal and institutional practices, expectations and stereotypes regarding the roles of women and men in society can affect the structures and organizational processes (Martinet al., 1983). These factors can also affect and be affected by women’s attitudes and behavior at work (Fagenson, 1990).

In sum, the gender–organization–system perspective is based on the premise that the interaction between gender, situations, and social systems is a continuous and re-iterative process (Terborg, 1981; Martin et al., 1983). The individual is affected by situations and social systems, which in turn, are affected by individuals (Terborg, 1981). The characteristics of individuals, situations, and systems jointly determine individual attitudes and behavior which affect each other over time. Hence, according to the gender–organization–system perspective, women are underrepresented and under-utilized in organizations V. Yukongdi & J. Benson for several reasons: women have been placed in disadvantaged positions in organizations; women are socialized to display traits, behavior, attitudes that are argued to be incompatible with top management positions; and women have different expectations placed

on them by society (Fagenson, 1990). These factors cannot be considered in isolation as they, in turn, affect one another.

The organizational context includes such factors as the corporation's culture, history, ideology, policies, etc., (Martin et al, 1983) as well as its structure. Thus, women's limited ability to attain high-level positions may, for example, be due to: the devastating effect a past reverse discrimination lawsuit had on a (particular) company (history); an organization's belief that individuals with military/combat experience should be promoted first (ideology); or a paternalistic culture that uses individuals' performance on the golf course rather than at work as the basis for promotion (culture and policy).

Finally, the gender–organization–system perspective suggests that individuals, organizations, and social systems change at different rates in response to environmental changes, and therefore, women in different countries have not progressed into managerial positions at the same pace (Parker & Fagenson, 1994).

The gender-organization-system explanation for women's limited progression in organizations is an interactionist approach. As such, it makes the following assumptions:

1. Behavior in organizations is a continuous interaction of feedback between person characteristics (Le., gender), situations (Le., the organizational context) and the social-institutional system in which these interactions occur (Terborg, 1981; Martin et al., 1983).
2. The individual in this interaction process, is being both changed by situations and social systems and changing them (Terborg, 1981).
3. Characteristics of people, situations and systems should be studied as joint determinants of individual attitudes, cognitions and behaviors which influence each other over time (Terborg, 1981).

An example should clearly illustrate the interactional nature of the GOS theory. As noted earlier in this study, women have been found to exhibit inappropriate traits, behaviors, attitudes, etc for assuming high-level management positions. The GOS perspective suggests that this may be due to: women having been situated in disadvantaged work situations, their having been socialized to exhibit "inappropriate" attributes for assuming high-level jobs, and/or because of societal practices and expectations regarding women which have been carried into and acted upon within the organization by its members. All of these factors, in turn, affect one another.

All in all, the gender-organization-system perspective presents a new theoretical framework and a distinct methodology and statistical approach not suggested by — the gender-centered and organization structure formulations. That is, according to the GOS perspective, when researchers are attempting to determine why women have had limited success making it into the corporate boardrooms, they should try to identify the characteristics of the organization context, the characteristics of the social system as well as characteristics of the individuals, i.e., their gender, which could potentially be affecting women's and men's attitudes, cognitions and behaviors (Terborg, 1981).

#### **4. Biological, Socialization and Structural/Cultural Models**

Three approaches may explain the glass ceiling phenomenon or gender-related inequality in organizations: biological models, socialization models, and structural/cultural models (Cleveland et al., 2000; Bartol, 2003; Weyer, 2007). According to *biological models*, there are biological differences between men and women, such as genetic, hormonal, and physical characteristics, and the reasons for these differences are the result of genetic patterns evolved from adaptations to differing reproductive circumstances of early males and females. These adaptations have emerged slowly over thousands of generations, and these differences are stable and necessary for survival (Cleveland et al., 2000; Lueptow et al., 2001). *Socialization models* focus on observed differences between men and women. The models assume that men and women behave differently due to various social and cognitive development processes of the individuals related with life stages, such as schooling and work life. In this approach, observed differences are not stable, but on the contrary, are subject to change (Cleveland et al., 2000; Bartol, 2003). According to *structural-cultural models*, social structures, systems, and arrangements lead and define gender differences due to discrepancies in status and power (Bartol, 2003).

In these models, differences exist to keep the powerful in control and the powerless without power, and these are changeable (Cleveland et al., 2000). Socialization and structural/cultural models have received more attention in the literature than biological models (Bartol et al., 2003) and have been called the most accepted explanation for gender differences (Lueptow et al., 2001).

On the other hand, it is necessary to explain expectation states theory, which is one of the most prominent theories within structural-cultural models (Weyer, 2007). According to expectation states theory, there are shared gender stereotypes within society and these stereotypes contain status beliefs (Ridgeway, 2001). Status beliefs refer to widely shared cultural beliefs or schemas about the status positions within society, such as gender, race, ethnicity, education, or occupation (Berger et al. 1980; Ridgeway, 2001; Weyer, 2007). When status beliefs develop about a status position, inequality arises between members of this status position (Ridgeway, 2001). In this context, these beliefs associate greater status, worthiness, and competence, and more valued skills with the advantaged group than the disadvantaged group within status position (Ridgeway, 2001). Thus, whereas agentic attributes are generally ascribed to men, communal attributes are generally ascribed to women (Eagly, 2001). Agentic characteristics and behaviors can be described as assertiveness, ambition, competing for attention, and making problem-focused suggestions. Communal characteristics might be described as speaking tentatively, supporting and soothing others, and being helpful and sympathetic (Eagly, 2001; Weyer, 2007).

Research explains that the emergence of gender-related behaviors in organizations generally fall into three categories: biological, socialization, and structural/cultural models (Bartol, 2003; Cleveland, 2000; Powell, 2003). Researchers conclude that the study of gender and management has resulted in a sameness/difference debate with research on women in management becoming either polarized or marginalized. Thus, they argue for attention to the

“biological, social and thereby often domestic fact of being female, and how this intersects with the conditions in the workplace” (Rees, 2003).

## **Conclusion:**

It is clearly understood that cultural beliefs or schemas about gender are an important antecedent of the glass-ceiling phenomenon in society. These beliefs, schemas, or expectancies constitute gender roles in a society, and individuals internalize these gender roles through the socialization process. Besides, these beliefs or schemas vary from society to society. At this point, the typology of Hofstede about cultural characteristics may help to understand the differences between societies about gender roles better.

The gender-centered and organization structure perspectives are utilized to comprehend inappropriate characteristics of women who have underrepresented in top management positions (Fagenson, 1990).

I believe an analysis that incorporates the core elements of gender, race, ethnicity and class are critical to understanding not only her career world, but also other contexts of her life. And we need to recognize the role of history in the study of women in management.

Three theoretical perspectives were discussed in this study. The conclusions that can be drawn with respect to each were explored. It was shown that the gender-centered and organization structure perspectives, more so than the gender organization- system approach, limit the conclusions that can be drawn about women's behavior in organizations. As knowledge expansion is the goal of the women in management field, use of the GOS perspective is encouraged.

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