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The Broken Rung vs. the Glass Ceiling: Assessing the Greater Barrier to Women's Career Advancement

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Abstract

Despite significant attention to workplace gender equity, women remain underrepresented in management and executive roles. By integrating organizational data, cross-national case studies, and theoretical analysis, this article demonstrates that the "broken rung" contributes to early career attrition among women and compounds subsequent barriers to advancement. While the glass ceiling persists, its effects are intensified by earlier failures in promotion pipelines. This discussion critically engages with alternative explanations—including leadership self-selection and stereotype threat—and evaluates mixed evidence across various sectors. The article concludes with evidence-based recommendations for multilevel organizational and policy reform, and calls for empirical research to disentangle the complex, intersectional pathways affecting women's career trajectories.

Keywords

Broken Rung, Glass Ceiling, Women's Advancement, Gender Equity, Leadership Barriers

1. Introduction

Although incremental progress has been made toward gender parity, a significant gap remains in the representation of women in managerial and executive leadership positions globally (Grant & Levasseur, 2025; LeanIn.org, 2019; Oakley, 2000). Historically, the concept of the glass ceiling has received widespread attention as a metaphor for invisible barriers that impede women's rise to senior leadership roles. However, emerging research has identified the broken rung—defined as the

disproportionately low rate at which women are promoted from entry-level positions to their first managerial roles, the gender gap at the first step up to management—as a more critical bottleneck that leads to cumulative disadvantages in women's career progression (Kratz, 2025; LeanIn.org, 2019; McFee, 2024). The "broken rung" is directly responsible for early career attrition, as women who are passed over at this initial stage are more likely to leave or stagnate in their careers. The terms "broken rung" and "early career attrition" are not used interchangeably; rather, the broken rung is presented as a principal driver of early career attrition for women, causing lasting imbalances in the leadership pipeline. This article reviews and critically assesses both concepts, synthesizing findings across quantitative data, qualitative evidence, and theoretical frameworks. The objectives are to: (a) compare the severity and interaction of these two barriers; (b) identify empirical and theoretical gaps; (c) consider alternative explanations for underrepresentation; and (d) offer actionable recommendations for organizations and policymakers.

2. Methodology

This study employs a comparative and integrative literature synthesis, drawing from peer-reviewed journal articles, organizational surveys, and international case studies. Sources span U.S., Asian, and African contexts (Essel, 2023; Greening, 2019; Kratz, 2025; Syaebani et al., 2024). Relevant literature was identified based on the scope of existing research on the "broken rung," "glass ceiling," gender leadership barriers, and women's advancement, as articulated in these sources.

Studies included:

- Provided original organizational data, empirical evidence on promotion and leadership outcomes, or offered established theoretical frameworks addressing women's career progression, with publication dates post-2000.
- Were focused on English-language, scholarly contributions covering contexts in the U.S., Asia, and Africa, specifically as reported in the referenced works.

Exclusion criteria:

- Opinion pieces, editorials, and anecdotal reports not substantiated by organizational or quantitative data were not considered, in accordance with the methodological standards demonstrated in the cited studies.

No database search outside of the sources found in the supplied reference list was performed. The review process was designed to ensure all findings, comparisons, and syntheses are strictly supported by and limited to the original sources detailed in this document's references. Synthesis of findings occurred both quantitatively and qualitatively, following the methodologies illustrated by the referenced works. Quantitative data on promotion and leadership representation were paired with qualitative themes from interviews and sociocultural analyses. The review also integrates dissenting theories—including leadership self-selection and stereotype threat—to expand interpretive depth and highlight divergent causal explanations (Oakley, 2000; Shirley & Feitosa, 2024).

3. Results

The Broken Rung: Barrier to Advancement in Management

Across sectors and regions, the "broken rung" represents a major source of attrition for women's leadership potential. For example, for every 100 men promoted to a managerial role, only 72 to 87 women receive the same opportunity; these numbers fall even lower for women of color in the U.S. (Kratz, 2025; LeanIn.org, 2019). In Indonesia, for example, deeply embedded occupational gender norms result in women being excluded from promotion pipelines even before eligibility is considered (Syaebani et al., 2024). Other contributing factors include peer and supervisory bias, lack of sponsorship, and non-transparent promotion practices (Oakley, 2000; Parmer, 2021).

The Glass Ceiling: Barrier to Reaching Senior Leadership

For women who overcome the first hurdle, advancement into senior leadership is often blocked by the glass ceiling—persistent exclusion from top roles, unequal compensation, and stereotype-driven scrutiny (Oakley, 2000; Wang et al., 2019). Although female representation in management has improved marginally, board and C-suite diversity remains stagnant, with women often required to emulate traditionally masculine leadership traits to gain legitimacy (Chen et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2019). Evidence from Ghana and Japan reveals that even in environments where women hold managerial roles, disparities in executive authority and pay persisted (Essel, 2023; Greening, 2019).

The Promotion Pipeline Effect

Based on the data in **Table 1**, if there were no "broken rung," the probability of a woman being promoted to an executive role (thus breaking the glass ceiling) relative to a man being promoted to an executive role would range between 0.58 and 0.78. On average, a 68% chance compared to a man. However, due to the "broken rung" at the first step in the career ladder (first level manager) and at the other managerial roles level in the career ladder, for every man that reaches the executive level, the likelihood of a woman being promoted to first level manager then into other managerial roles and then into an executive role (thus breaking the glass ceiling) ranges from a probability of 0.32 to 0.58. On average, a 45% chance compared to a man. Stated differently, the broken rung phenomenon, which results in a 25% to 44% reduction in the pool of women available for promotion to executive roles, has a first order effect on women's chances of reaching the executive suite, while the glass ceiling has a second order effect.

Table 1. Promotion rates by gender at career stages.

Career Level	Promotion Rates		
	Men (%)	Women (%)	Source
First Level Manager	100	72 - 87	LeanIn.org (2019); Kratz (2025)
Other Managerial Roles	100	78 - 86	Essel (2023); Greening (2019)
Executive Roles	100	58 - 78	Essel (2023); Greening (2019)

4. Discussion

Comparative impact and interaction synthesized findings suggest that the broken rung is more impactful than the glass ceiling due to its early-stage disruption of leadership pipelines (Kratz, 2025; LeanIn.org, 2019; McFee, 2024). This initial bottleneck disproportionately affects women of color and women in culturally conservative sectors (Kaba, 2012; Syaebani et al., 2024), ultimately reducing the pool of candidates eligible for senior advancement and mentorship—thus compounding the effect of the glass ceiling (Shirley & Feitosa, 2024). Notably, intersectionality highlights that race, ethnicity, and other identity dimensions further compound barriers: for example, in the United States, Black women and Latinas are promoted at significantly lower rates than white women at the first managerial step, reinforcing both vertical and horizontal inequalities in organizational hierarchies (Kaba, 2012; LeanIn.org, 2019). Similarly, women from marginalized backgrounds may face compounded stereotypes and discrimination that intensify both the broken rung and the glass ceiling. Addressing these layered inequities requires intersectional approaches that consider the specific challenges faced by diverse groups of women, as discussed in Kaba (2012). While the glass ceiling remains a formidable barrier, it is structurally a *second order* effect. Without early interventions, upper-level representation remains limited, regardless of top-down reforms.

4.1. Alternative Explanations

Some research suggests that differences in leadership aspirations and confidence may contribute to gender disparities in advancement (Shirley & Feitosa, 2024). However, structural barriers persist even when controlling for individual differences in ambition and background (Oakley, 2000). Research also indicates that women may internalize societal doubts about their leadership capabilities, leading to lower application rates for promotions or visibility-enhancing roles (Shirley & Feitosa, 2024). These internalized doubts and differing aspirations often emerge in response to, and can be exacerbated by, persistent structural barriers such as biased evaluations, limited mentorship, and a lack of visible role models. In this way, individual-level factors and organizational structures are deeply intertwined: internalized limitations may reduce participation in promotion processes, but the organizational context—characterized by subtle discouragement or exclusion—serves as the backdrop that reinforces these doubts. Therefore, addressing personal and structural factors together is essential to create sustainable change. This phenomenon compounds structural barriers already present in organizational systems (Grant & Levasseur, 2025). Moreover, occupational segregation stemming from gendered educational tracks and recruitment limitations may hinder progress in national labor markets. Addressing only within-firm policies may be insufficient without broader social and educational reforms (Syaebani et al., 2024).

4.2. Mixed Evidence and Research Gaps

The long-term effectiveness of interventions such as unconscious bias training

and sponsorship programs remains mixed, particularly when these strategies lack transparency, measurement, and executive accountability (Oakley, 2000; Shirley & Feitosa, 2024). Empirical validation of sustained, multifaceted interventions is necessary (Essel, 2023; Greening, 2019).

4.3. Data Visualization

Incorporating visual tools such as tables and charts (see **Tables 1 and 2**), can enhance the clarity and persuasive power of research findings. Systematic visualization of promotion rates, pay gaps, and representation data helps reduce cognitive load and facilitates actionable insights for advocates and policymakers (Essel, 2023; Wang et al., 2019). Future research should integrate such visualizations systematically to better communicate disparities and progress in women's leadership advancement.

Table 2. Women's representation in senior leadership and on boards.

Sector	Women in Senior Roles (%)	Women on Boards (%)	Source
Healthcare	25	20	Essel (2023); Greening (2019)
Food Services	18	15	Essel (2023)
Corporate (U. S.)	22	17	Chen et al. (2016); Wang et al. (2019)

4.4. Contextual Nuance

While this study employs a global perspective, selected arguments would benefit from greater contextual specificity. Case studies from Indonesia (Syaebani et al., 2024), Ghana (Essel, 2023), and Japan (Greening, 2019) illustrate how gender barriers are culturally mediated. Focusing on specific industries (e.g., healthcare, food services, academia) or countries may further illuminate the interaction between national policy frameworks, societal norms, and corporate culture in shaping leadership disparities.

5. Recommendations For Practice

To address both the broken rung and the glass ceiling, the following organizational initiatives are recommended:

1) Implement and audit standardized, transparent promotion processes—especially at the entry-management level (Kratz, 2025; McFee, 2024).

2) Expand leadership development and sponsorship programs, emphasizing high visibility stretch assignments (Essel, 2023; Oakley, 2000).

3) Mandate pay equity and diversity reporting at the departmental level, making data public where feasible (Kaba, 2012; Wang et al., 2019).

4) Normalize flexible work policies and caregiving accommodations to retain and promote women during family-building years (Parmer, 2021).

5) Invest in early incentives and motivation-building programs for women.

6) Broaden recruitment strategies to address occupational segregation and disrupt gendered pipeline limitations (Syaebani et al., 2024).

6. Conclusion

The broken rung—women's lack of promotion into initial managerial roles—emerges as the most significant and foundational barrier to the appropriate representation of women in leadership. Left unaddressed, this issue constrains progress at all subsequent stages, including the glass ceiling. Achieving gender equity requires a dual focus: repairing the broken rung and eliminating the glass ceiling. Intersectional, longitudinal research is essential to identify, measure, and dismantle systemic barriers across sectors and societies (LeanIn.org, 2019; Kratz, 2025; Syaebani et al., 2024).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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