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The Negative Impact Of Reducing The Gender Gap

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The United Nations and many governments are focusing on reducing the gender imbalance. This has resulted in reducing the gap, higher empowerment for women and economic prosperity for them, their families and the nation. This paper looks at the result of this and its impact on women, their families, men and society.

Approach: This is an exploratory study that uses a detailed literature review to find some manifestations of gender inequalities and the impact of strategies women adopt to be treated as equal to men.

Findings: This paper questions the theory that equality means treating women like men. It asks whether we are doing women an injustice as they are different and need to be accepted for who they are and what they contribute not just to the work place but also to family and society itself. This paper raises questions for future research, government and organizational policies and puts in perspective women's rights.

Originality/Value: High

Key words: gender equality, women empowerment, societal values, human resource development

Paper Type: Conceptual Paper

1.0 INTRODUCTION

As per the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), all human beings are born free and are equal in dignity of rights. They are not to be discriminated against.

Discrimination is any distinction, exclusion or preference based on race, colour, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction, social origin or other designated criteria, which have the effect of nullifying or impairing equality or opportunity or treatment in employment or occupation (Hongchintakul and Kleiner, 2001). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that all humans have the right to life, liberty, security of person, standard of living adequate for health, well-being of himself (herself) and family, work, social security, right to recognition as a person before law; equal before law. This declaration specifically states that motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. Fathers are not mentioned. Over years, the girl child and women have gained increasing importance in government, non-government and corporate policies in an effort to redress the perceived male-dominion of human kind.

Men and Women are the two opposite sides of the same coin. Their outward expression and internal orientation are different, yet we often perceive them holistically as part of mankind. This resulted in the creation of rules and systems based on the principle of equality. These principles stem from inequality itself – physical, reproductive, mental, emotional and more importantly perceptual. Both have values but to different audiences this weightage differs. Men and Women are similar and yet different and governments and management must recognize that. Because of the changing role of women in society we see a new dilemma: how to manage interpersonal gender relationships. This is not an easy transition and change though it has been slow is coming, and is inevitable.

Are some of the policies that we rush to create for the benefit of the organization, womankind and society or for the future generations? It has been found that the advancement and development of women have affected prosperity of nations and the family economics (Hausmann *et al.*, 2006). As recommended by Prokhovnik (1998, p. 84), we need to recognize citizenship as gendered, and not rely on the conception of it as 'neutral' (abstract, universalized, genderless); it should take into account the diverse ways in which citizens engage in activities. This brings up the interesting question of whether we can really look at activities as “neutral” and then what factors affect the interrelationships between genders (especially in the workplace) and the outcomes of current practices. Liberation may not be equality but recognition of the skills each

gender is capable of bringing to the table. “Gender blindness” seems to be a malady of management theory and women need to be acknowledged for their contribution (Mavin *et al.*, 2004). This paper brings to the fore some consequences of reducing the gender gap and suggests that governments and management start looking more holistically at women, especially their contribution to the family, society and nation.

1.1 Demographic Skew

When addressing the gender divide at the workplace you must begin with the demographic skew. Though women represent forty percent (40%) of the world’s labour force, their share of management jobs rarely exceeds twenty percent (20%) dropping to two-three percent (2-3%) in the largest and most powerful enterprises (ILO, 2007). Employment opportunities are not equal: in 2003, globally for every 100 men in the labour force, 63 women worked (ILO, 2004). The gender gap seems wider in the Middle East and Arab countries (See Figure 1). There is also occupational segregation (Cross and Linehan, 2006; Padavic and Reskin, 2002). Worldwide it seems more women are being employed on part-time basis (ILO, 2007).

According to the Labour Force Survey conducted in 2002, in developed countries like UK, though they are 51% of the workforce, women account for only 28% of private sector management jobs: this trend is repeated in the financial services industry where 52% of workforce and 29% of managers are female; and retailing sector where 60% of people employed were women, while only 41% of managers were female (Maxwell *et al.*, 2007). Only 10 Fortune 500 companies are run by women, only 20 Fortune 100 companies have women in top management jobs (ILO, 2007).

1.2 The Glass Ceiling

Though much has been written on the “glass ceiling” some aspects need to be reinforced. Studies show that women on an average work longer hours than men and continue to do most unpaid work (Wirth, 2002). While the reasons for this gap have been widely discussed very little research has gone into how the gap affects inter-relationships between sexes. Glass ceilings seem to affect advancement opportunities for women more than men. In most developed countries,

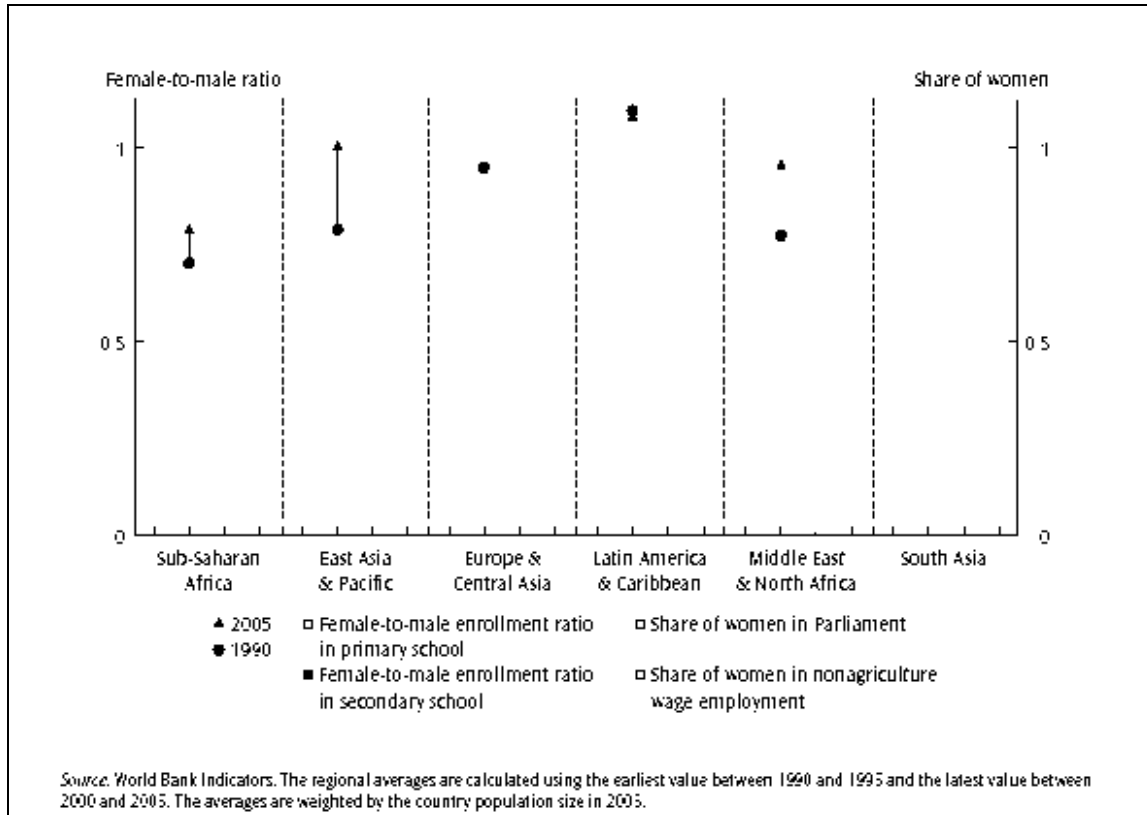
women hold 1-5% of top management jobs, though in developing countries managerial positions held by women were higher (Wirth, 2002). Even in women dominated industries women tend to be clustered around the lower ranks (Yousof and Siegel, 1994). This is across professions, while women represent only 5% of practicing adult cardiologists and 10% of trainees, both, women and men enter medical school at nearly equal numbers (Limacher *et al.*, 1998). Men continue to hold a higher proportion (upto 90% or more) of line jobs (loss or profit making jobs) according to Wirth (2002).

Women face discrepancy in pay, rarely hold top positions, face increasing wage gap with age and higher unemployment than men (ILO, 2007). A study by Wiggins and Peterson (2004) found that just being male, increased one's salary by a factor of 1.28. According to Lips (2007), wage gap increases as the level of qualification rises with women in USA, being paid only 60% of their male counterpart with an equivalent PhD degree, while at lower levels of education the figure decreases to 75% to 100%!

1.3 Balancing Gender Equality

There has been progress in the gender equality balance and women's empowerment (See Figure 1). Women now make up a majority (60-90%) of the part-time workers (ILO, 2007). Women have a stronger hold in the service industry which is the fastest growing contributing sector to GDP than in traditional agriculture and industry jobs (World Bank, 2007a). According to a US based study released in 1999, the greatest growth of women-owned business has been in non-traditional sectors like construction, wholesale trade, transportation/communication, agriculture and manufacturing (US Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). Women owned firms comprise one-fourth to one-third of businesses in the formal sector and a much higher role in the informal sector. According to the Microcredit Summit Campaign, 14.2 million of the world's poorest women (nearly 74% of the 19.3 million poorest) are served by microfinance (Cheston and Kuhn, 2006). According to the National Foundation for Women Business Owners, women are starting new businesses at a rate nearly twice that of men (as cited by Buttner and Moore, 1997). Women are contributing to economic growth of nations (Hausmann *et al.*, 2006).

Figure 1: Progress in official indicators of gender equality and women's empowerment by region 1990-2005



Source: Global Monitoring Report 2007

Globally, since 1970, women have filled two new jobs for every one taken by a man and in America, 140 women enrol in higher education each year for every 100 men (Franklin, 2006). This is the trend also in Nordic countries, where women are outstripping men in tertiary education by a ratio of 1.5: 1 (Haufmann *et al.*, 2006). Women also are completing upper and tertiary education faster than men (Global Monitoring Report, 2007; OECD, 2005) and are slowly infiltrating the management ranks. Thirty percent (30%) of American small businesses are owned by women (Brown and Orsborn, 2007). Today women owned firms account for 25-33% of the total business populations according to the statistics released by the *Break The Glass Ceiling Foundation* and these have doubled in the last 12 years (US Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995).

As per the study conducted by Koshal *et al.*, (1998) fewer men (66%) than women (88%) felt comfortable with having a women as their “boss”. According to US government statistics, in

2006, of 12,025 cases of sexual harassment, 15.4% were filed by men (EEOC, 2006) and there maybe more men who are reluctant to register complaints in fear of being perceived as “weak”. Also for men unemployment is on the rise as seen in UK, according to the latest Labour Force Survey (2006) we see the ratio of males wishing to work or seeking a job, on the rise and that ratio is declining for women.

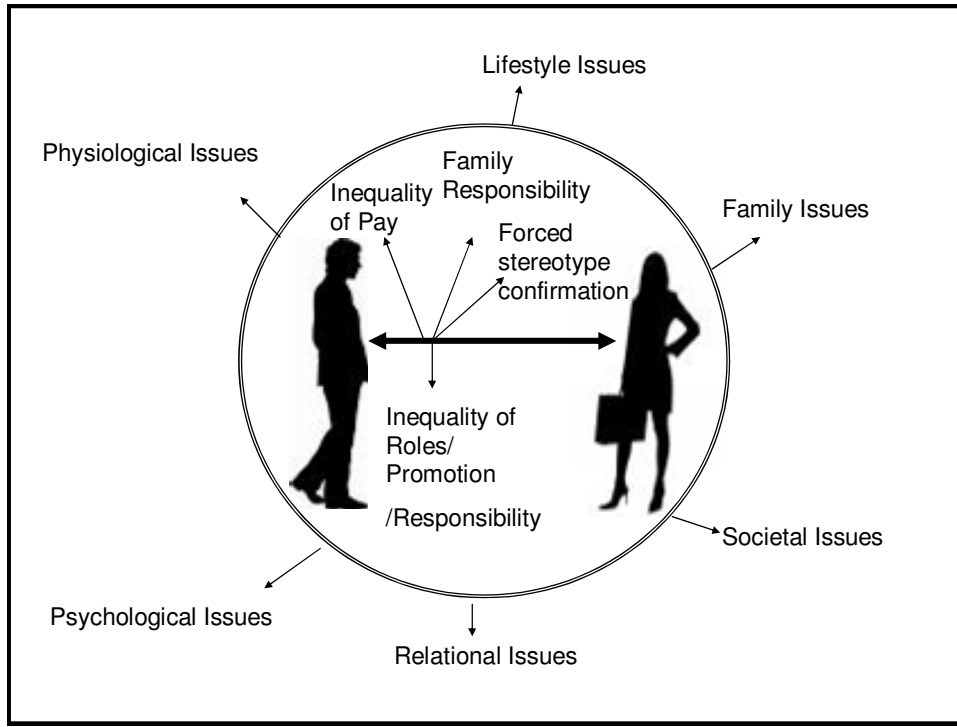
Men and women will have to learn how to cope with changes. Men who have so far fortified themselves in their “male kingdom” are finding the walls very fragile, made of glass and are unable to stop it shattering! There is no returning to Venus or Mars! This paper attempts to find critical areas that influence relationships between genders through a rigorous literature review followed by a survey. This paper is divided into the following sections. We will begin with women and look at the route that is peppered with glass shards from a cracking glass ceiling and the fortress wall. The next section looks at the consequences of the policies designed to increase “equality”.

2. Equality – Where is it going ?

Women should have equal opportunities but are equal opportunities, and fairness being confused with equality? As seen from above, inequalities in gender access to fair and equal rights arises from (1) family responsibilities (2) forced stereotype confirmation (3) inequality of pay (4)Inequality of roles/promotion and responsibility. What impact does it have on the men and women of this world? Identified in Figure 2 are five key reasons which are inter-related. They are as follows:

1. Physiological or Biological Issues
2. Psychological or Mental Issues
3. Societal Issues
4. Family Issues
5. Lifestyle Issue

Figure 2: The Price of Equality



2.1 Physiological or Biological Issues

Women are physically not designed like men but in a corporate world are rewarded for acting like men. This sometimes may lead to high risk behaviour like smoking, drinking and drugs. For example women who smoke 3-5 cigarettes a day double their risk of heart attack while a man would have to smoke 6-9 cigarettes a day (Lange, 2007). Heart Disease is now the leading killer of women in USA. Women cardiac arrests are often triggered by psychosocial stress whereas men’s cardiac arrests are often triggered by physical stress (American Heart Association, 2007; 2002). A study found that the risk of injury for women after consumption of alcohol was higher than for men (Stockwell *et al.*, 2002). A study on occupational injury in universities found that women claims for injuries were 1.36 times higher than for men and injuries were higher for lifting, falling, noxious exposure and repetitive motion (Saleh *et al.*, 2001).

Since men have a “Manly” image to uphold, they are reluctant to bring “small ailments” to medical attention and this could lead to medical issues that are non-treatable because of delay. Men in USA had a higher death rate for all 15 leading causes of death and died nearly 7 years younger than women (Courteny, 2000). On the other hand women put in long-hours at the

workplace (often longer than men) to prove that they are equal to men (Cross and Linehan, 2006). This puts stress on women who are balancing both careers and family responsibilities. Still, women outlive men by 5 to 8 years in the countries with the higher life expectancies, and by 0 to 3 years in countries where life expectancy is low (World Bank, 2007 b).

Women have a biological clock to take care of (Powell and Mainiero, 1992). With career advancement, women are delaying childbirth though childbirth defects increase with age. As fertility decreases they are resorting to infertility treatment which is leading to multiple births (Ombelet *et al.*, 2005). Caught between working parents who have a dearth of time and increasing income, children are facing higher obesity as they eat more processed foods (Joint World Health Organization and Food and Agriculture Organization report, 2003) and this is being linked to a higher incidence of Type I diabetes, ADD and has been found to contribute to early onset of puberty (Kaplowitz *et al.*, 2001).

Hence we find that gender imbalances affect men, women and children's biological health.

2.2 Psychological

Perception of discrimination seems to be more harmful psychologically to women than men perhaps because of the group's relative position in the social structure (Schmitt *et al.*, 2002; Carr *et al.*, 2000). In a national US survey, it was found that women (ages 25-74, both minority and majority) who faced high levels of discrimination in their daily lives, had their sense of growth, mastery, autonomy, and self-acceptance compromised (Ryff *et al.*, 2003). Ryan and Haslam (2005) found women who were appointed to boards of 100 FTSE companies during a period of stock-market decline were being set up for a higher risk of failure than men as these companies that appointed the men would have had a consistently bad performance the preceding five months.

With more families becoming nuclear families and the rise in single parent households, the responsibility and upbringing of young ones and balancing a career becomes an impossible feat. Working mothers, more than working fathers have a lower feeling of psychological well-being due to time-deficits with children and they feel the strain when unable to find time for

themselves (Nomaguchi *et al.*, 2005). Unilever, in a global study of 3200 interviews found that only 2% of the women thought themselves beautiful and two thirds felt that media and advertising set them unrealistic targets of beauty (Aaker, 2007).

Men have to live up to the image of the “Stronger sex” or risk being penalized and this leads to high risk behavior (Courtney, 2000). Men suicide rates are three times that of women, based on the average of the latest available data of a 100 countries by World Health Organization (2003). Men also face discrimination from outsiders in women dominated industries like nursing where they form just 6% of American nurses (Hilton, 2001).

A study has shown that working married women who work outside the house have improved mental health and this reduced psychological distress among married men (Kessler and McRae, 1982). When the relationship between opposite genders in the family environment is supportive, the psychological distress decreases and this is important for women who need a higher level of social involvement (Umberson *et al.*, 1996). Very often the barriers women face are self-imposed (Cross and Linehan, 2006) as they are caught making the big “sacrifice” of family over career (Wood and Newton, 2006), which may lead to some simmering resentment.

2.3 Family

There is a disappearance of the joint family culture as more families turn nuclear or broken. In Scandinavian countries marriage as an institution is diminishing. With empowerment, divorce rates are increasing. In Norway, half the children are now being born to unmarried women, in USA the numbers have tripled since 1970 (Knox, 2004).

Managers are acknowledging children are an impediment to a woman’s career (Wood and Newton, 2006). Discontinuous employment histories for MBA degree holders were negatively associated with future income and satisfaction and seemed to impact men more strongly than women (Schneer and Reitman, 2006) perhaps as women have a reputation of choosing families over their career. Non-friendly family industries penalize women severely for after-birth related leave resulting in women migrating to family-friendly sectors leading to human capital depreciation (Nielsen *et al.*, 2004).

Family size is not only shrinking but relationships and quality lengths of time are disappearing. According to the non-profit organization TV-Turnoff Network, in USA, the amount of time parents spend with kids in meaningful conversation is 38.5 minutes in a week. This falls in comparison to the time a child watches TV, which is 1680 minutes per week (2007). Most meals are TV times as the same survey found 66% of Americans eat dinner while watching TV. A survey from the Kaiser Family Foundation found TV as a surrogate child-distracter as it frees up time for parents (Arnst, 2006) who want some personal time, or just to get work done as it calms the child and keeps them safely occupied. A controversial study by Cornell University and Indiana University-Purdue University (2007) finds that early childhood viewing is related to the onset of autism.

2.4 Societal

Swedish governmental support for families (leave, child care and reduced work times) results in a tax-to-GDP ratio of over 50% according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2007b). Female work employment rates are highest in Canada at 76%, with 67% of those women employed in the private sector but access to childcare costs are high though parents pay only 19% (CAD 7 per day) of the full cost. Society needs to contribute to help women work and balance their family life. Most Scandinavian countries find more women employed in the public sector (OECD, 2001). The key seems to be government incentives where women and men can both balance work life and careers with family. Scandinavian policies have been praised but Hakim (2004) contends that Swedish women still face a larger glass ceiling in terms of pay, managerial jobs, and they opt for more family friendly government jobs.

Countries are facing decreasing birth rates as women delay childbearing and opt for a smaller family size (Wood and Newton, 2006). The fertility rate in 1970 for the world was 4.8 and in 2004 it was 2.6 (World Bank 2007c). The fertility rate in many countries is lower than the 2.1 required to maintain a current population (Economist, 2007). Women are often faced with the dilemma of choosing a career or family (Wilson, 1995; Limacher *et al*, 1998).

The breakdown of society in USA has been blamed for rising crime rates and can be traced to the breakdown of the “family” (Fagan, 1995). In UK this has translated into a cost of £20 billion a

year in terms of welfare according to a Tory report called Breakdown Britain (Duncan, 2006). In USA, according to the Youth Risk Behaviour Surveillance System, 16% of students had smoked a cigarette and 25% had drunk alcohol before the age of 13 for the first time (Eaton *et al.*, 2005). The same study looked at depression and suicide (See Table 1). Depression was higher for 9th, 10th and 11th grade students and higher among girls (36.7% female: 20.4% male). Children need parents, when they are young and especially during adolescence. In a society with media that does not always convey the true picture, children are growing up faster at a younger age. According to the Office of National Drug Control Policy, the direct costs to society of drug abuse in 2002 in USA alone were US\$52 Billion (2004).

Table 1

	Total	Male	Female
Depression and sadness more than 2 weeks	28.5%	20.4%	36.7%
Considered suicide	16.9%	21.8%	12.0%
Committed suicide	8.4%	10.8%	6.0%

Networking is an important part of career progression (Kattara, 2005) and it involves socializing outside the work hours (Cross and Lindhan, 2006). Women with family responsibilities find it difficult to participate and hence miss these opportunities to bond with peers, clients, bosses and other influencers who can be business, professional, government and social contacts (Li and Leung, 2001) and these are typically male (Stroh *et al.*, 1992). Women are unlikely to socialize in bars, during dinners and the sporty events men frequent to bond (Timberlake, 2005) and where men go typically to display high risk behaviour.

What would be interesting to find out is whether the increased costs in social care and gender balance are offset by the increased cost of public health and safety? Michael Moore is his thought provoking film “*Bowling for Columbine*” found that Canadians were more psychologically secure than their American counterparts and he attributes this to Media and the stress on social responsibility rather than fear psychosis (Moore, 2002). This raises strong

questions of mental well-being for the future as a whole new generation of dual parent-earners, single parent children and children from disruptive homes grow up. Nuclear families don't have access to the relationship strengths some joint families do.

2.4 Relationship

As women become more empowered and career-oriented there is a reluctance to enter into a binding relationship with a partner as seen in Scandinavian countries. For example, from the mid-1990s, 5 percent of women in Sweden had experienced three or more unions (marriages or cohabiting relationships) by age thirty-five; 18% of Swedish women had already experienced their first dissolution of union by age 25 and 35% by age 35 (Prskawetz *et al.*, 2003). Further, with heterosexual couples where both sexes wanted to maximize personal careers, tensions occur as often career choice depends on compromise and very often that is made by the women (Smith, 1997). This also affects children who are brought up in these households.

Mentors have the ability to guide managers up the corporate ladder especially if they are influencers (Cross and Linehan, 2006). Forty-Six (46%) of women business owners, compared to 37% of men business owners reported having a mentor or role model who they drew encouragement from or looked up to before starting their business (US Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). Most women seem to find it easier to get along with men colleagues than other women and these relationships were seen as the second most important reason after gender discriminations to prevent women moving up the career ladder (Kattara, 2005). Men are reluctant to mentor women in fear of damaging their reputation (Cross and Linehan, 2006) either due to the association with “unsuccessful female protégé” or the sexual innuendo.

In the Koshal *et al.* (1998) study, women do not welcome fellow women advancement in the organizations to the extent men do. Nor do women seem to get along with other women in the work place (Kattara, 2005). Women by nature prefer smaller number but stronger ties while men prefer weaker ties but reach out to a greater number of people (Timberlake, 2005). Women entrepreneur are more likely than their male counterparts to seek out opinions or inputs of others (US Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). When men go to socialize in bars, women tend to opt out due to a feeling of intrusion or the fact that wives of colleagues may object (McClaren *et al.*,

1997). Less career oriented women or wives of senior managers, themselves act as barriers for other women (Madock and Parkin 1994).

2. 5 Lifestyle

The “consumption economy” is the biggest lifestyle change that has taken place in recent years. A headline according to the “Economist” read as follows, “*Forget China, India and the Internet: Economic Growth is driven by Women*” (2006). Women in USA, now buy or influence an average of 85% of everything sold in USA (Quinlin, 2003). Baby Boomers are 55% of US Labor force (Hall and Richer, 1990). Boomer women are influencing 80% of the \$2.1 Trillion and Boomers spend on consumer goods and services and they will control 2/3rd of American Consumer wealth in the next decade (Brown and Orsborn, 2007).

3. Discussion

There are benefits of equality. Women who have been suppressed and denied basic rights are now being empowered to claim their rights and are being acknowledged as equals. They are now at least able to demand equal pay and position for their capabilities. They are taking responsibilities for their future, raising economic prosperity for themselves and their families and gaining more self-confidence. But if you look at quality of life index as calculated by the Economist Intelligence Unit (Economist, 2005), gender equality is just one of the nine factors. The others are material well being, health, political stability and security, family life, community life, climate and geography, job security and political freedom. Countries with a high quality of life index score have a higher community and family life score with more job security. However the UN Human Development Index only looks at life expectancy, literacy, education and standard of living. More factors must be addressed.

Gender equality has costs. Children and our future may be that cost and only longitudinal studies can tell. This paper recommends relooking the glass ceiling and the glass walls that surround men as they seem least prepared for the empowerment of women. Organizations need to take the employee out of the corporate context and look at social responsibilities to the families of those employees, and to society itself ; Governments need to step in as they are responsible for all citizens, even the unborn one. With the change in population ages, the younger nations will have

an edge. The authors do wish to present a neutral perspective though we hope it will be a thought provoking one and lead to better policy design at the government and corporate levels. It is hoped that this paper will help people have a career choice which can co-exist with family needs.

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