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# A maze of metaphors around glass ceilings

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**Keywords**
maze, metaphors, ceilings, around, glass

**Disciplines**
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**Abstract**
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**Design/methodology/approach -** The development of metaphors and labels related to theories about the causes and consequences of glass ceilings are discussed. They are classified according to whether or not they infer women play a role in creating glass ceilings.
**Findings** - We conclude most metaphor-linked explanations focus on discrimination and prejudice towards women seeking leadership positions. A small number of metaphors target characteristics of women as causes for the gender inequality in leadership and upper management.
**Practical implications** – Even though there is a plethora of metaphors highlighting obstacles and prejudice against women leaders and several metaphors have been part of the popular lexicon for at least three decades, metaphors do not appear to have greatly helped to quicken the dismantling of glass ceilings.
**Originality/value** - This is a unique approach to reviewing literature in this area.
**Keywords -** Glass ceilings, Metaphors, Leadership, Gender differences, Women's careers
**Paper type -** Literature review

## Introduction

Glass ceiling became a popular term after it was used in *The Wall Street Journal* by journalists Hymowitz and Schellhardt in 1986. It is an everyday metaphor used to describe the invisible barrier in front of women seeking to move up organizational hierarchies (Powell, 2012). This phenomenon is responsible for the scarcity of women holding leadership and senior management positions in many areas, but particularly in business and politics (Catalyst, 2011; Okimoto and Brescoll, 2010). A popular belief is that leadership and success are linked to a person having the "right stuff" (Wolfe, 2008). Eagly and Carli (2007, p. 83) argue that blaming gender differences for the existence of glass ceilings in organizations leads to the unacceptable view that women are made of the "wrong stuff" for leadership positions. Furthermore, explanations that target characteristics and behaviours of women as being a major cause of glass ceilings have been described as taking a "blame-the-victim" approach (Barnett and Rivers, 2004; Janoff-Bulman and Wade, 1996). These theories possibly legitimize and help to perpetuate the phenomenon of glass ceilings (Barnett and Rivers, 2004). This concern has been a catalyst for the present paper.

The aim of this review is to explore and assess the evidence and implications linked to many metaphors and labels that have been used to highlight diverse theories about glass ceilings. For the sake of brevity and clarity, the analysis in this paper will include labels as being within the category of metaphors. A second aim is to examine the degree to which women are blamed for the gender imbalance in leadership by classifying metaphors according to whether or not they suggest the characteristics of women play a role in creating glass ceilings. O'Neil *et al*. (2008) have warned that "research related to women's careers is scattered across a variety of fields" and "(t)his diffuse and somewhat fragmented literature dilutes and disperses cumulative knowledge, giving rise to a plethora of interrelated knowledge...inhibiting their coherent integration" (p.728). Therefore, we decided a novel approach was needed for a review.

In their metaphorical analysis of careers, Buzzanell and Goldzwig (1991) argue that

metaphors play a major role in discovering and describing patterns of career behaviour and help stimulate new ideas, as well as masking them. Consequently, this paper posits that the analysis of glass ceiling related metaphors will shed light on the many causes proposed for the dominance of men in upper management. Further, this is a unique approach to reviewing literature on glass ceilings. We acknowledge that metaphors related to problems in women's career advancement have been discussed by other authors. For example, an analysis of a range of metaphors can be found interspersed within Eagly and Carli's (2007) detailed review of how women become leaders. In another scholarly work on women and leadership, Stead and Elliott (2012) provide a chapter on metaphors that considers only six examples. Therefore, the current paper is considered unique as it is structured to allow the compact comparison of a diverse range of metaphors about the causes and consequences of glass ceilings. In addition, we have also been unable to find any review of metaphors that classifies them according to whether women are or are not responsible for gender inequality in workplaces.

**The growth of alternatives to the glass ceiling metaphor**

Some scholars argue that the glass ceiling metaphor is no longer appropriate as women have achieved a host of senior leadership positions, including national leadership. Consequently, more accurate metaphors are suggested such as "labyrinth" (Eagly and Carli, 2007) and "firewall" (Bendl and Schmidt, 2010). Browne (1998), a proponent of an evolutionary psychology view that women are generally not predisposed for leadership, maintains that the most appropriate label would be "gossamer ceiling" because a workplace barrier only exists for women who are not prepared to break it. However, the predominant position is that the most powerful and memorable image of the barriers preventing or hindering women in achieving promotions in their careers is provided by the glass ceiling metaphor (Barreto *et al.*, 2009; Burke and Vinnicombe, 2005). Nevertheless, a study of the literature on glass ceilings reveals a maze of metaphors, each used to encapsulate a theory or research finding about gender differences in career advancement.

Since the initial appearance of the glass ceiling metaphor in 1986, it has undergone many modifications to emphasise specific problems and obstacles related to the careers of women. Sometimes a new metaphor is simply used to emphasize gender inequality in specific occupational area. For example, "perspex ceiling" (Australian Manufacturing Worker's Union, 2011) focussed attention on women in manufacturing industries whilst "grass ceiling" describes the scarcity of women leaders in agricultural organizations (Alston, 2000). It was also used by Australia's Sex Discrimination Commissioner (Broderick, 2010) to illustrate the inequality in the media coverage of Australian women's achievements in sport. Other adaptations of the glass ceiling metaphor highlight problems that exist for women in a broad range of careers. These will now be reviewed in two sections. First, we consider those metaphors that are related to women in the workplace. Second, the large group of metaphors related to working women with families is discussed.

**Metaphors related to women working in organizations**

Ryan and Haslam (2005) identified an additional hurdle for women seeking promotion within organizations, the "glass cliff". They posit women are often promoted to precarious leadership positions. This phenomenon only takes place after women are in leadership positions and therefore relates to women who have broken through the glass ceiling. The existence of a glass cliff in an organization indicates that promotion may increase the risk of failure for female leaders. Haslam and Ryan (2008) carried out experimental studies with management graduates, high school students and business leaders to support their view. Their results

suggested there is an increased likelihood of women being chosen ahead of an equally qualified male when an organization's performance is declining. Adams *et al.* (2009) investigated CEO appointments in US corporations between 1992 and 2004 asking whether female executives were over-represented as leaders of organizations in precarious financial positions. They found a reverse pattern whereby females are more likely to be appointed to CEO positions in times of financial success and therefore rejected that a glass cliff problem existed (Adams *et al.*, 2009). This finding is challenged by Ryan and Haslam (2009) who point out that Adams and her co-researchers examined 1500 companies and only 61 (4%) had female CEOs.

A less commonly used metaphor in career advancement theories is the "glass escalator" (Ng and Wiesner, 2007; Williams, 1992). It describes discrimination against women in female dominated occupations where men can experience a gender privilege by receiving more rapid promotions than their female colleagues (Ng and Wiesner, 2007). Other construction related metaphors allow us to complete an organizational structure. "Glass floor" is a term used to describe a phenomenon that can occur at the lowest levels of organizations where staff are likely to have low educational qualifications and little likelihood of promotion (Barnet-Verzat and Wolff, 2008). Barnet-Verzat and Wolff report that gender inequality at this level can be more severe than at the top levels of organizations where glass ceilings exist. Guillaume and Pochic (2009) investigated the existence of horizontal segregation of careers based on gender. They found strong evidence for this inequality known as "glass walls" by measuring the feminization rate of careers and compared careers where women represented greater and less than 30% of the workforce. Careers dominated by women have also been labelled "velvet ghettos" (Guillaume and Pochic, 2009). Davidson (1997) used the term "concrete ceiling" to describe the embedded discrimination that prevents black and ethnic minority women being promoted. Finally, "glass door" describes the initial hiring barrier that can exist for women wishing to enter an organization (Cohen *et al*. 1998, p. 723). Studies have found the glass door is more likely to be opened to women by organizations when a higher proportion of women are already employed (Cohen *et al.*, 1998).

In her influential study of women in organizations, Kanter (1977) proposed that skewed sex ratios act as barriers and result in women's lack of influence in organizational decision making. She argued women become "tokens" when they occupy a small minority of executive positions and this "tokenism" leads to pressure not to fulfil negative stereotypes about women. Further, women also face possible sexual harassment when they are in a small minority (Kanter, 1977). Women who are regarded as token leaders may be subject to increased scrutiny and scepticism similar to the reactions given to an outsider (Haslam *et al.*, 2010). Kanter (1977) coined the term "homosocial reproduction" to describe insiders replicating themselves by selecting new colleagues with similar backgrounds and demographic characteristics. Having this homogeneity may improve communication and understanding and an organization that is male-dominated might then argue it improves effectiveness and feels more comfortable promoting males instead of females (Tharenou, 1997). Research has suggested that tokenism can be changed into a "critical mass" and achieve an environment in which women leaders are not regarded as being recruited for symbolic value. Thomson *et al*. (2008) argue that corporate and political groups are likely to become supportive of women leaders when there are at least three women in the leadership group. It was recently found in a study of 317 Norwegian firms that attaining a goal of at least three women on a corporate board was significantly correlated with higher levels of organizational innovation (Torchia *et al.*, 2011).

Associated with the concept of tokenism is "built-in legitimacy" (Eagly and Carli,

2007, p. 157). It is argued women leaders can be seen as lacking the legitimacy that is given to men, and this can be rectified if it is recognized that a women chosen for a leadership position was indeed the best candidate (Eagly and Carl, 2007). “Homophily” is closely linked to Kanter's term of homosocial reproduction. It describes the similarity to the dominant group and results in the recruitment and promotion of others who are similar (Tharenou, 1997). Homophily also describes the tendency to interact with those who share similarities in opinions and behaviours and has been used to explain why “old boys clubs” and “old boys networks” are so common (Benschop, 2009). Fine (2010) argues the homophily phenomenon is an extension of the saying ‘birds of a feather flock together’. Gender is nearly always a component of homophily (Benschop, 2009) and this leads to sex segregation of workplaces (Wood, 2006). There is also the “new old boys network” (Gamba and Kleiner, 2001, p. 102) resulting from the growing influence of the Internet which allows primarily groups of younger men to build business contacts. However, this observation obviously predates the growth of social networks such as Facebook which also allow women opportunities to build networks for career development.

Fassinger (2008) posits women can face a “chilly workplace climate”. This unwelcoming environment is reinforced by double standards, especially in unfair evaluation practices which discriminate against women who show assertiveness. Another barrier listed by Fassinger involves women being excluded from information and social networks that enhance promotion opportunities. She argues being denied entry to the old boys' club, tokenism, and “shadow jobs” (women being subjected to extra scrutiny) are a negative group of barriers frequently acting against women. However, Fassinger (2008) maintains the harshest barrier against women manifests as sexual harassment, a common and largely unreported problem in US colleges. Women (and men) can overcome a chilly workplace climate by “fitting in” with the help of mentoring relationships (Drury, 2012).

The social and economic penalties against ambitious and successful women are labelled "backlash effects" (Phelan *et al.*, 2008). An experimental study by Phelan *et al.* (2008) showed that women who express assertive characteristics in job interviews were likely to be disadvantaged. The importance of making a good impression extends much beyond job interviews (Phelan *et al.*, 2008). "Self-promotion" (making superiors aware of achievements) is an important "impression management" strategy to ensure career promotions (Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2010). This process is part of the social capital theory which contends that career benefits result from the accumulation of relationships. Studies have shown it is less acceptable for women than men to promote and take credit for their workplace achievements and women can risk censure from colleagues “for fear they may be perceived as unfeminine, pushy, domineering and aggressive” (Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2008, p. S71). The backlash against assertive women in careers has led to the popularity of coaching courses such as the Bully Broads Boot Camp in California (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Founded in 2001 by a female CEO, the training sessions are designed to help boost careers of women executives by helping them to modify aggressive tactics (Pinker, 2008). Eagly and Carli (2007) suggest these camps are another example of gender double standards as bullying by male managers is far more acceptable.

“Queen bee” is a metaphor used by scholars and the media to describe another source of negativity toward women, except it is between women (Mavin, 2006) The label was first proposed by Staines, Travis and Jayerante (1973) to describe successful women who did not support the women's liberation movement. Consequently, it was to signify women in senior management who fail to help other women in their pursuit of promotion. The negativity was extended to infer a queen bee “will sting if her power is threatened by other women” (Mavin,

2006, p. 271). Mavin (2006) argues that the continued use of this metaphor helps to perpetuate another "blame or fix the women" perspective, maintaining the status quo of gender inequality.

Tharenou (1997) cites "career tournaments" as being important in the career advancement of women and men. This theory links promotions to winning a series of progressively more selective competitions. Those who do not win early are eliminated or restricted to consolation rounds. Ongoing promotions/wins are strongly helped by starting opportunities and therefore these tournaments usually discourage late emerging skills. O'Neil *et al.* (2008) note that women and men are likely to be competing in different career tournaments. They also argue that women are less likely to be given high visibility projects which act as catalysts for career advancement. Moreover, low level starting placements restrict women's advancement more than men's (O'Neil *et al.*, 2008). The "Matthew Effect" was proposed by sociologist Merton (1968) to explain the career paths of scientists whereby early success leads to disproportionate advantages in career development and ongoing success, combining to produce steeper "career trajectories". The effect is based on a verse in the New Testament which states those who are successful will then receive more opportunities to achieve more success (Gladwell, 2009). Judge and Hurst (2008) found this effect existed across a wide spectrum of careers and Gladwell (2009) showed that it played a major role in the success of professional sportspeople. The Matthew Effect seems appropriate to help explain the difference in career trajectories of women and men.

“Sticky floor” is a metaphor with two interpretations. First, it has been used to account for women being held back in lowly paid jobs at the bottom levels of organizations (Kee, 2006). It was initially used in 1995 to describe how the careers of women in academic medicine were stalled due to a lack of institutional resources and support (Carnes *et al.*, 2008). More commonly, sticky floor is related to the theme that women self-sabotage their careers and are responsible for self-imposed barriers in workplaces. This pattern is obvious in a growing number of popular books written by women. Titles of these books make it clear that women have to supposedly make major changes in their career strategies and play the game like men. Some titles are: *Play Like A Man, Win Like A Woman: What Men Know About Success That Women Need To Learn* (Evans, 2001); *Nice Girls Don't Get the Corner Office: 101 Unconscious Mistakes Women Make That Sabotage Their Careers* (Frankel, 2004); *It's Not A Glass Ceiling, It's A Sticky Floor: Free Yourself From The Hidden Behaviors Sabotaging Your Career Success* (Schambaugh 2007).

In sum, this section of the paper has identified only three metaphors related to organizations that place responsibility on women for the gender imbalance in leadership: self-promotion, queen bee and bully broads. However, many popular books purporting to help women in their career advancement, espouse a common theme that women have placed self-imposed obstacles in their career pathways and these are often linked to the sticky floor metaphor. In contrast, this section showed that the majority of metaphors used in the literature on women’s career development are used to identify antecedents and consequences of discrimination and prejudice against women in the workforce. Such images include tokens and tokenism, glass escalators, glass cliffs, glass floors, shadow jobs, backlash effects, glass walls, glass doors, concrete ceilings, chilly workplace climate, critical mass, built-in legitimacy and homophily (or homosocial reproduction) which leads to the formation of old boys clubs and networks, as well as the internet-based new old boys networks. Also identified were a range of metaphors that could be considered neutral according to our classification criterion. These include career tournaments, career trajectories and the Matthew Effect.

**Metaphors related to working women with families**

There is an extensive body of literature on the work-family conflict that faces women (O'Neil *et al.*, 2008; Tharenou, 1999). It is apparent that metaphors play a major role in describing and explaining the competing demands of work and family life for women. One of the most commonly used examples is the "second shift", a term popularized by Hochschild (1989) to describe working women having far greater involvement than their husbands/partners in home and family responsibilities, i.e., doing unpaid labour. The application of the metaphor has been expanded to include not only mothers but all women's work overload and time scarcity (Marecek, 2003). Even though Hochschild's (1989) study was based on US data, similar trends are found in other countries. In India, the nation with the world's highest number of working women, women are responsible for most household work and childcare. This second shift has been linked to high levels of depression, obesity and chronic illnesses in Indian women who work outside the home (Desai *et al.*, 2011). In Australia, Craig (2007) analyzed data collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics Time Use Survey from 4000 households and found strong evidence for working mothers having greater workloads than men.

Another frequently used metaphor, the “maternal wall”, gives a clear image of how women’s careers are negatively affected by the breaks in employment necessary for motherhood (Crosby *et al.*, 2004; Williams, 2004). Barnett (2004) uses three different images to explain why it is commonly believed that women are suited for the home and not the workplace. Colleagues, both male and female, can view women who accept promotions as being derelict in their maternal responsibilities, encapsulated in the image of a woman being the "ideal homemaker". Conversely, the maternal wall can influence men into neglecting family leave as they might be seen as not fully committed to work and their dual role as breadwinner and "ideal worker" (Barnett, 2004). Similarly, another stereotypical image initially appears to place women in a highly favourable light. This has been called the "women are wonderful effect" (Eagly and Carli, 2007, p. 215). Women are regarded as superior to men in areas such as friendliness and caring. However, such positive portrayals help reinforce attitudes that women are better than men in childcare and household work, and are thus less suited to leadership (Eagly and Carli, 2007). The dual connotations of the women are wonderful effect is akin to the dichotomy of benevolent and hostile sexism proposed by Glick and Fiske (1996).

“Mommy track” is a term coined to criticize an article by Schwartz (1989) in the Harvard Business Review. She proposed businesses should provide two pathways for working women: a career-primary-track and career-and-family-track. The latter was quickly relabelled as the mommy track by the New York Times (Maracek, 2003). Whereas Schwartz, (who was the first CEO of Catalyst, a women's think tank), was advocating this pathway as a temporary choice for some working women, media commentators used the term to belittle women's involvement and commitment to the workplace. The image has taken on a new alternative meaning as it is used by women who extol full-time motherhood (Maracek, 2003).

Belkin (2003) was the first to use "opt-out revolution" to describe the small trend of women leaving professional, often prestigious jobs to concentrate on raising their children. This so-called exodus attracted much media attention and has been cited as evidence that women really don't want high powered positions (Boushey, 2008). Still (2006) uses a major tenet of evolutionary psychology to explain this phenomenon, that is, on average, men and women value different things. She argues that women are affected by evolutionary selected drives to protect their children and this has a stronger influence in the US than in other industrialized countries because of poor child care services. Therefore, she concludes opting out is a predictable response of American women (Still, 2006). Stone (2007) carried out

interviews with 54 women who had left prestigious jobs to raise their children. She suggests the major reason for their decision was gender inequality at home as their spouses were not willing to adapt their own careers to take more involvement for family responsibilities. Research by Moe and Shandy (2009) found women who opt-out not only give up their independent income, they experience loss of power and then face many difficulties if they attempt to re-enter the workforce. Women returning to their careers after a break typically suffer a "wage penalty" (Moe and Shandy, 2009). However, Fassinger (2008) argues that highlighting the excessive demands on working mothers can reinforce the stereotype that women are unreliable workers (Fassinger, 2008).

Hom *et al*. (2008) challenges the claims of a corporate exodus by women executives and professionals as the evidence is more anecdotal than based on empirical evidence. Instead of a groundswell of women leaving their careers, Boushey (2008) showed it only involves a minority of women. She analyzed data collected between 1979 and 2005 for US women to determine the "children effect" on women's employment and found the recent decline in employment of mothers (supposedly evidence for the opt-out revolution) was statistically insignificant. The difference between women's employment in managerial and professional careers of women with and without children has been labeled by Percheski (2008) as the "child penalty". She found it decreased between 1960 to 2005 for US women contradicting the claims that mothers were increasingly leaving the workforce.

There are assorted metaphors connected to opting out. First, the “leaky pipeline” implies women leave careers at many different stages (Bilimoria *et al.*, 2008). It has been cited as a major reason for a supposed shortage of female aspirants for high level management (Carli and Eagly, 2001). Kekelis *et al*. (2005) propose a compound metaphor of “hurdles in the pipeline” to explain why women fail to reach the top positions in technology careers. A major hurdle is lack of career guidance (Kekelis *et al.*, 2005). Next, "off-ramps" and "on-ramps" are terms specifically used to describe women leaving and returning to work (Hewlett and Luce, 2005). Mainero and Sullivan (2005) challenged conventional explanation for the opt-out revolution by proposing a "kaleidoscope career" model. This involves women shifting the pattern of their careers by rotating different aspects of their lives to arrange their roles and relationships in new ways. They argue that firms introducing “family-friendly” policies, such as parental leave, is not a sufficient step forward to help women to fully develop their careers. To benefit from kaleidoscope thinking, organizations need to look away from linear career paths and provide opportunities for all workers to take a career interruption and return at a later point (Mainero and Sullivan, 2005).

Summarizing, this review has found only a few metaphors that infer women do not want to gain top level positions in organizations. These are opt-out revolution, leaky pipeline, off-ramps and mommy track. Other metaphors highlighted obstacles for working mothers, especially second shift, maternal walls, child penalty and wage penalty. Stereotypes such as ideal homemaker and the women are wonderful effect can also hinder the career advancement of women.

Table 1. Classification of glass ceiling related metaphors and labels

| Metaphors/labels inferring women play a role creating glass ceilings | Metaphors/labels inferring women do *not* play a role in creating glass ceilings |
|---|---|
| gossamer ceiling, opt-out generation, leaky pipeline, off-ramps, mommy track, queen bee, bully broad, sticky floor, self-promotion | perspex ceiling, grass ceiling, glass cliff, second shift, maternal wall, glass escalator, glass floor, glass wall, glass door, concrete ceiling, tokens, tokenism, homophily, homosocial reproduction, built-in legitimacy, critical mass, old boy's club/network, chilly workplace climate, fitting in, shadow job, hurdles in the pipeline, backlash effects, child penalty, wage penalty, ideal homemaker |

**Discussion**

The primary aim of this paper was to examine a wide range of theories about glass ceilings. While this review is not exhaustive, we have adopted a unique approach by analyzing metaphors related to obstacles hindering women reaching the top levels of organizations. We sought to review very diverse views of glass ceilings, whilst still achieving a coherent integration. Our integrating theme was to focus on two contrasting approaches that explain the gender imbalance in leadership positions. Essentially, the first group of theories argues characteristics of women have led to far fewer women than men climbing to the top of organizations. We suggest the theories linked to these metaphors may legitimize and even help to perpetuate the phenomenon of glass ceilings, especially when cited by those who argue women are not made of the "right stuff" for leadership. The second theoretical group, which contains a majority of the metaphors analyzed in this paper, posits stereotypes and discrimination against women are largely responsible for causing the glass ceiling in front of women. The two groups produced by this classification are shown in Table 1. Our strategy of looking for metaphors as signposts of theories and research about women's career advancement is a novel way of sampling the literature. Therefore, the findings from the present study lead us to conclude the majority of explanations for glass ceilings cite stereotypes and discrimination against women.

A discussion of our findings needs to consider the use of metaphors in this area. It is not surprising that many metaphors are used in explanations related to glass ceilings as "(m)etaphors structure our most basic understandings of the world and shape our actions and beliefs" (Mason, 2011, p.51). How is this achieved? First, metaphors play an important role in learning by providing novel insights (Hager, 2008). Second, metaphors are a "powerful means to catch our attention" and direct it toward important issues (Maasen and Weingart, 2000, p. 2). As many benefits are to be gained by communicating with metaphors, it needs to be asked whether they have helped to quicken the dismantling of glass ceilings. The evidence suggests the answer is 'no'.

Evidence highlights the slow progress of women achieving equality in leadership

positions. For example, a report by Catalyst (2007) stated that it would take over 70 years for women to achieve equal numbers with men in the boardrooms of Fortune 500 companies. Between 2009 and 2011, the proportion of women directors of Canada's top 500 corporations only rose from 14.0 to 14.5 per cent (Catalyst, 2012). The situation is similar in the United Kingdom and the UK Equal Opportunity Commission predicted that it would take another 65 years for women to achieve parity with men as directors of Britain's top companies (Thomson *et al.*, 2008). It is also difficult to argue that constant progress is being made. The percentage of executive officer positions held by women in US management dropped from 14.4 to 14.1 per cent in 2010-2011 (Catalyst, 2011) and the number of female directorships of the top 100 UK companies fell between 2005 and 2006 (Thomson *et al.*, 2008). In Australia, the proportion of female politicians in the Parliament of the most populated state recently dropped from 28 percent to 20 percent (Chappell, 2011).

This analysis has directed us toward identifying a limitation of the current paper. We did not assess the popularity, the level of usage and awareness of each metaphor listed in the review. Future research should investigate whether women are more aware than men of glass ceiling related metaphors. Studies could also consider whether CEOs, directors and senior managers in organizations with high proportions of women in management have a greater awareness of glass ceiling metaphors, and whether they use these terms more commonly. Therefore, it is suggested future empirical research investigate relationships between gender, management level, how often the metaphors are used, plus how well people recognize the link between specific metaphors and obstacles preventing gender equality at the top levels of organizations.

**Conclusion**

Several metaphors such as glass ceiling, tokens, maternal wall and second shift have been part of the popular lexicon for three decades. The apparent contradiction between the plethora of glass ceiling related metaphors and the slow rate of increase in the proportion of women as leaders, suggests that even memorable metaphors based on extensive empirical research are doing little to help counter the perception that women are not made of the “right stuff” for leadership. Clearly, to cite another metaphor, “the managerial playing field continues to be tilted in favor of men” Powell (2012, p. 119). The challenge is immense for women and men who want to hasten the end of glass ceilings.

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