

# The Conundrum of the "Sticky Floor"

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The "Glass Ceiling" concept has occupied centre stage in public discussions and organizational action for quite some time. While we cannot say that it has been completely shattered, one cannot deny that sizable 'cracks' have developed. However, when it comes to gender-based wage disparity, the "Glass Ceiling" represents just one end of the spectrum. At the other extreme lies the problem of the "Sticky Floor".

Catherine White Berheide coined the term "Sticky Floor" in 1992. It represents the hurdles women face in career advancement and salary increment at the lower tiers of the corporate structure, mainly at the entry-level. The likelihood of reaching the mid-management levels starting from the bottom is, to date, an abysmally hopeless situation for women. This is especially so

in small to mid-sized industries. Hence, they are "stuck to the floor", without a chance of even making it up to the "Glass Ceiling", let alone breaking it.

Multiple reasons can be attributed to this. Women entered the labour market when the two World Wars posed an issue of shortage in the workforce. During this time, women were primarily employed in factories or made to take up menial tasks. They were not considered equal to men and were presumed to be temporary substitutes in the industry. These thoughts were reflected in their wages, which were substantially low compared to men. As mass schooling and graduation rates rose in the late 20th century and women started getting employed in clerical and managerial posts, the wage gaps for skilled

jobs began decreasing. By the first decade of the 21st century, men and women were almost on an equal footing when it came to compensation for skilled labour, be it in wages or promotions. However, the same cannot be said for semi-skilled and unskilled workers.

Low levels of supervision and intervention by regulatory authorities in these sectors can be a reason. Gender-based wage disparity and discrimination in career advancement opportunities are seen in smaller organizations as well. This can be attributed to the fact that these establishments are small enough to escape the radars of the Government, media, and the general public. Also, while mammoth organizations care about their public image and thus promote gender equality, the smaller organizations do not have this parameter to worry about and are more concerned about their companies staying afloat by increasing the profit margins and employing underpaid women labourers.

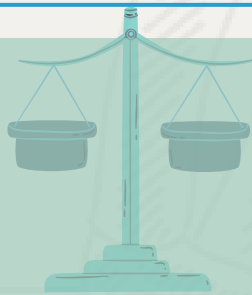
Most women employed as semi-skilled or unskilled labourers are school dropouts or illiterate. With the lack of a complete formal education, finding a job in the regulated sectors becomes a Herculean task. Also, most of them have mobility constraints

of being unable to travel far for work due to safety concerns or family commitments. Thus, there is a preference for work in areas closer to home, even if they are underpaid. And finally, hiring in these sectors does not occur based on formal interview processes or criteria but through recommendations by family, friends or neighbours. This makes women workers wary of raising their voices against unfair practices as they fear it may damage their relations with the person who recommended them. If the incident snowballs, they might be unable to find a job again in the same sector.

The problem of “the sticky floor” is a complex and multi-factorial issue that cannot be dealt with at one level alone. It must start with empowering women by imparting literacy and employment skills. The Government must focus on the blind spots and bring these industries under its regulatory ambit. And finally, as a society, we need to be sensitized toward the issue and support equal wages and opportunities for men and women, irrespective of the industry or job description. While looking at the glass ceiling, let us not ignore the stickiness of the floor that is holding society back from progressing.

#### References

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- 2 Yellen, J. L. (2020). The history of women's work and wages and how it has created success for us all. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/essay/the-history-of-womens-work-and-wages-and-how-it-has-created-success-for-us-all/#:~:text=Between%20the%201930s%20and%20mid,actors%20contributed%20to%20this%20rise>. Accessed on August 13, 2022.



## Indian legislations that address issues faced by women in the workplace

# 1

**Sexual Harassment at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) – POSH Act, 2013:** Safe workplaces are a prerequisite to creating a conducive environment to work in. Internal Complaints Committees are set up under the act to look into allegations of sexual harassment.

# 2

**Maternity Benefit Amendment Act, 2017:** Women are often disregarded for employment, promotions and appraisals based on the 'motherhood penalty'. The Act was recently amended to increase the duration of leave and provides services such as creches at the workplace. However, it doesn't recognise paternal leave, making one wonder whether parenting is the sole preserve of one gender.

# 3

**Equal Remuneration Act, 1976:** The constitution mandates equality in all aspects and in line with this, the Act was passed which is essentially a legal provision for equal pay.

As per the UN Women's Rights and the Law Report Card published in 2021, 98 countries do not have legal provisions for equal remuneration, while in 72 countries, women face industry restrictions when seeking jobs. 71 countries do not provide paid maternity leave of at least 14 weeks, and 78 countries have no provisions for paternal leave. A recent World Economic Forum study from 2018 states that it will take a minimum of 108 years to close the economic gender gap across regions.

*In the following table, we look at some of the laws around the world that strive to achieve parity in the workplace for women.*

COUNTRY	LEGISLATION
Iceland	Pay equity law places the onus on a company with more than 25 employees to prove that it provides equal pay.
United Kingdom	Companies with more than 250 employees are required to report their gender pay gap publicly.
Belgium	Law mandates that the gender pay gap be considered when unions and employers negotiate wage agreements.
France	Companies with more than 50 employees are mandated to conduct comparative salary surveys and provide for criminal sanctions on failure to carry it out. Proposed software in payroll systems to directly monitor pay gaps.
Germany	Employees can directly find out from employers if they are paid at par.
Portugal	Annual assessment on the gender pay gap to be submitted by all employers with more than 250 employees, along with a plan on how to eliminate the gap
Spain	Companies must keep a wage register by professional category and gender, which all can access for review.

If you feel you have been subjected to sexual harassment or if you would like to make any suggestions to us regarding curbing sexual harassment or gender bias on campus, please reach out to us at:  
 Email: [chr-cmgi@iima.ac.in](mailto:chr-cmgi@iima.ac.in)  
 Phone: 97129 15533  
 Please note that any communication with the CMGI is strictly confidential.

The monthly newsletter from the Committee for Managing Gender Issues (CMGI) is an attempt to initiate conversations on discrimination, gender bias, sexual harassment, and related issues. We would love to have the community participate. Please reach out to Therese Abraham at [theresea@iima.ac.in](mailto:theresea@iima.ac.in) for submissions, queries, and/or feedback.