

An hourglass-shaped graphic with a globe in the top bulb and another globe in the bottom bulb. The hourglass is light blue and has a dark blue top and bottom. The globe in the top bulb is dark blue, and the globe in the bottom bulb is light blue. The hourglass is centered on the page.

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The Glass Ceiling: A Fact Sheet

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Abstract. The term "glass ceiling" is used to describe the barriers that women and minorities are thought to encounter as they advance up the organizational ladder. This fact sheet provides references to and briefly discusses reports on the issue by the U.S. Department of Labor and the Glass Ceiling Commission (created by the Civil Rights Act of 1991, P.L. 102-166). It also summarizes the prevalence of women in senior level management positions at Fortune 500 companies in 1995 according to Catalyst (a nonprofit research and advocacy group for women.).

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The Glass Ceiling: A Fact Sheet

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Women and minorities in senior management positions are underrepresented compared to their fraction of total employment. The term “glass ceiling” has developed to describe the barriers that women and minorities are thought to encounter as they advance up the organizational ladder. This explanation for the relative scarcity of women and minorities in upper management positions was explored by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL)¹ and by the Glass Ceiling Commission.² DOL’s Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs continues to conduct the glass ceiling audits of government contractors that it initiated in the mid-1990s.

“Nontraditional” Candidates for Management Jobs

Congressional interest in the issue of sex- or race-based employment inequities has included equal opportunity to enter “nontraditional” occupations.³ Nontraditional occupations typically are defined as those in which certain groups are underrepresented relative to their share of aggregate employment.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, women made up 47% of all employed persons in 1999, and minorities (i.e., non-whites), 16%. In contrast, the Commission’s reports cited studies from earlier periods of Fortune 1000 industrial and Fortune 500 service companies that showed 95%-97% of senior managers to be men, and 97% of male top executives to be white.

¹ U.S. Department of Labor. *A Report on the Glass Ceiling Initiative*. Washington. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991; and *Pipelines of Progress: A Status Report on the Glass Ceiling*. Washington. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1992.

² The Commission was created by the Civil Rights Act of 1991, P.L. 102-166, Title II. Its 1995 reports (*Good for Business: Making Full Use of the Nation’s Human Capital* and *A Solid Investment: Making Full Use of the Nation’s Human Capital*) may be obtained through the Internet [<http://www.ilr.cornell.edu>], the U.S. Government Printing Office, or the National Technical Information Service.

³ P.L. 102-530 (Women in Apprenticeship and Nontraditional Occupations Act) and P.L. 102-235 (Nontraditional Employment for Women Act).

More recently, a study of the 500 largest U.S. corporations found that 11.9% of corporate officers in 1999 were women.⁴ Although this was up from 8.7% in 1995, the figure remains well below women's share of all workers. In the 340 firms from which both gender and race/ethnicity data were obtained, 1.3% of corporate officers were minority women. With the number of women holding top corporate positions (i.e., chief executives, chairmen, vice chairmen, presidents, chief operating officers or executive vice presidents) at Fortune 500 firms doubling between 1995 (57) and 1999 (114), their share grew from 2.4% to 5.1%.⁵

Some think that men disproportionately hold senior management positions because there are few women and minorities with sufficient, relevant work experience and educational credentials employed in mid-level "pipeline" positions. It is argued that as women and minorities increase their share of "feeder" positions, and thereby create a more diverse pool of qualified candidates, organizations will voluntarily promote more members of the two groups. Proponents of this viewpoint contend that government therefore need not oversee firms' promotion practices.

Other individuals believe that attitudinal and organizational barriers exist which inhibit the advancement of nontraditional candidates. As discrimination is perceived to be limiting opportunities for upward mobility among women and minorities, these observers think that firms should actively pursue ways to shatter the glass ceiling and that the government should assist firms in their efforts.

Federal Activity

The findings of the DOL and the Glass Ceiling Commission largely supported the latter point of view. The Commission recommended that the government lead by example, strengthen enforcement of antidiscrimination laws, improve data collection and increase public disclosure of diversity data for senior corporate positions.

The Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) has continued to conduct "glass ceiling reviews" of federal contractors. It performed 36 in FY1998 and 40 in FY1999. Corporate management reviews (CMR) are audits of personnel in corporate offices and of mid/upper level managers throughout the organizations. In addition to interviewing corporate officials, managers and other employees of federal contractors during the CMR, agency staff examine such things as the diversity of personnel in feeder positions and the availability of developmental opportunities for women and minority employees. The CMR also involves analysis of current managers' compensation, among other things.⁶ Glass ceiling reviews sometimes have caused federal contractors to give back pay or salary adjustments to women and minorities in executive, managerial and professional positions.

⁴ Catalyst. *1999 Census of Women Corporate Officers and Top Earners*. New York, 1999.

⁵ Women have been the primary focus of the glass ceiling issue. See also: International Labour Office. *Breaking Through the Glass Ceiling: Women in Management*. Geneva, 1997.

⁶ DOL. *OFCCP Glass Ceiling Initiative: Are Their Cracks in the Ceiling?*. Available at: [<http://www.dol.gov>].