

Glass Ceiling Article

The Glass Ceiling is the 'Unacknowledged barrier to advancement in a profession, especially affecting women and members of minorities.' The representation of minorities and women in high ranking positions across the world today is severely lacking, and a huge part of this is due to the invisible barrier that inhibits deserved progression and promotion. In the making of this article, which aims to raise awareness to the many different forms of the glass ceiling, I have been fortunate enough to sit down with individuals who have broken through the ceilings in their respective industries. The article will focus on the ceilings present when : being a gay man, being a black woman, being a white woman and being a black man. In response to understanding just how prevalent the glass ceiling is in so many industries, I also spoke to Tiernan Brady, the EDI lead for the law firm Clifford Chance, in order to learn about how we can work to reduce the glass ceiling, along with some of the initiatives involved in bringing about this change. All of the people I have spoken to have incredible stories, and have shown that glass ceilings are not unbreakable. I hope that anyone out there currently stuck underneath a ceiling will be inspired by them to persevere and break through it.

Being a woman in an industry dominated by males comes with a variety of challenges, most of which root back to the glass ceiling and prevent women from progressing at the same rate as men. Speaking to Patricia Kabuleeta, a member of the Ugandan High Commission, she told me a lot about the two major ceilings she is confined underneath; the one that comes with being a woman, and the one that comes with being African. Patricia's experience with the glass ceiling can be found even in her formative years, when her tribe the Tutsi, had to endure one of the most despicable genocides the world has seen, whilst it was overlooked by general society. After surviving this difficult time, Patricia attended Georgetown and Harvard, before breaking into the financial industry as one of Bill Clinton's interns. Despite this success, the glass ceiling persisted throughout, and some of the things said to Patricia in the early stages of her career are simply harrowing. Being labelled as a 'Coconut,' because she is black on the outside, and white on the inside, is just one example, or, 'When I say black people, I'm not including you,' is another. Unacceptable is the only way to put it, and the idea that this is said in a professional setting emphasizes how corrupt the system can be. Far too often people feel entitled to act in whatever manner they want, simply because they are in a powerful position that might even be undeserved. Away from the blatant racism that is so often directed towards people of minorities, Patricia wanted me to spotlight that these issues are also deeply engrained within everyday interactions. Whether it's the implication of 'For a black person?' when someone says, 'You speak well,' or it's her colleagues joking about how she needs to find a husband, the foundation is all the same. People feel they can act towards her with this tone of superiority because they see her as less. This is the glass ceiling. Even if these actions aren't directly discriminatory towards her, Patricia is still actively dealing with a disadvantage, as she has to overcome stereotypes before people consider her for promotion. Patricia is not a unique example, with this happening frequently in hundreds of industries.

Patricia's stance on the issue is that not enough is being done, and rightly so. Her belief that women have to bring their own 'fold out' chair to board meetings (because it's so rare that they would be given an actual seat), is all the more true when one considers how the glass ceiling is being tackled. More awareness needs to be raised around the issue, but even when this happens, it will take time for members of majorities to learn and become more aware to the glass ceiling. In the meantime, it is essential that those under the ceiling support and celebrate each other when possible. One of the most important messages Patricia portrayed to me was that when women do break the ceiling, they should hold the door open, rather than slamming it shut. It wouldn't be surprising to see that a large number of people aren't aware that Tanzania currently has its first female president. Whilst she has done incredibly well to break through the ceiling, not much has been done since to promote her achievement, or to enable Tanzanian women to follow on a similar trajectory, and this is part of the issue. Patricia stresses the importance of hiring strong, powerful women, and giving them the opportunity to demonstrate that

no matter your ethnicity, or gender, they are just as competent as the huge number of white males that currently dominate these positions.

Tara Falk, founder of Paragon Brokers, has a similar experience to Patricia through how their corporate careers begun. Both entered the workplace at a young age, with Tara's occupation in Lloyd's, seeing hardly any female placing brokers and a huge over-population of white men. She lists experiencing sexism, older male underwriters who did not want to trade with a woman, and male colleagues who would host social events at men-only clubs to put her at a disadvantage. Although these events are blamed on the traditional attitudes around at the time when they took place, this is not actually accurate. Tara emphasized that even though the unconcealed exclusion of women has died down within the finance industry, biases and discontent towards females in power still exist right under our noses.

Women have also too often fallen at the height of their careers due to a cynicism towards pregnancy, and Tara Falk's experience with this is a really useful insight into how businesses can treat women who choose to be mothers. Having a baby, a big decision for any woman, is made even more high-risk by the professional world's ruthless and unfair attitude towards the topic. Tara acknowledged that her fear of losing progress whilst having a baby was so large, that it was actually an important incentive behind her setting up her own company. And despite all this, a male colleague still stole three of her clients whilst she was on maternity leave. People questioned whether she could be a CEO and a mother simultaneously, and put her down if she prioritised her children. No matter how many times Tara's suitability was probed, she persisted, and remains to this day an incredible CEO and mother. We all should be immensely grateful to women who choose to bring life into the world, but instead, they are treated worse than almost anyone else. Despite the ludicrous immorality of this, it is still rarely spoken about. Pregnancy is a gift, not a burden, and the corporate world needs to be encouraged to look at the event as something beneficial for their employee, rather than as an inconvenient absence.

Sitting down with Bill Wharton, head of Argo Insurance in Bermuda, helped me progress my knowledge on the glass ceiling that black men can be underneath. Bill's story is particularly important in this aspect, as he was able to attribute specific moments as reasons for why he broke through the ceiling. Relationships are vital to success in the finance industry, and Bill emphasized that at the time he started, there were very little opportunities for black people to go to golf clubs, or out to dinner in nice restaurants. This is important because it meant that if they ever did get in front of a businessman, they would have barely anything in common with his corporate lifestyle, and as a result, would struggle, if not all together fail, in the industry due to difficulties building a network. The problem is worsened by the fact the richer sons of these businessmen would slide right into their positions, creating almost a negative feedback loop of perpetual nepotism. The idea that this could even happen highlights how deeply entrenched the glass ceiling is within society, and demonstrates the desperate need for change. Bill's metaphor of, 'They were playing golf on the course, so I became the caddy,' seems to be the most accurate way of putting it. Bill continued to use this tactic as his life progressed, learning about sports so that he could fit in, since others didn't accept him for what he was. Having to do so much just to be respected is wrong in so many ways. This extra leg work that people under the barrier have to put in perhaps also explains the glass ceiling; once someone finally does get into a position of power, they are exhausted with how long it took them to get there and so don't try to progress any further.

It is also worth talking about David Bamber, Design Studio Director at Tom Ford, and how his experience with the glass ceiling has been relatively pleasant. David made it clear when I spoke to him that he never actually experienced limitations in progression due to his minority background,

and as a result has held many positions of power throughout his career. Although there could be the argument that things are different in the fashion industry, I think instead an example should be made. The fashion industry should act as a model to all others, since its diversity is much closer to how the workplace should be, and people are free to be rewarded for what they deserve.

So now that you all know what the glass ceiling is, and some examples of it, what can be done to lift this barrier? Tiernan Brady at Clifford Chance is perhaps the most suitable person to answer this question as some of the initiatives he has implemented are revolutionary. His main belief is that culture within a professional setting is absolutely vital for change. After learning that black men were remaining at the firm for significantly smaller periods of time than their white colleagues, he knew an intervention needed to be made. He found the reason behind this was that managers didn't want to offend people by saying the wrong thing, and so took barely any notice of why people of varying ethnicities experience's might be different. To combat this, he introduced a reverse mentoring programme. Senior Leadership were paired with a junior based on a gender, ethnicity or LGBTIQ status, and they would meet once a month to talk about issues around inclusion. The programme had a huge impact, reducing the separation between how long white and black lawyers stayed at Clifford Chance down from 4 years, to 8 months. Tiernan also noticed, similar to what Bill observed, that people from ethnic minorities may struggle to build networks, and so he set up the bubbles programme. This contained 12 people, two ethnic minority trainees, and 10 other people who were mostly white and more senior. The group would meet once every six weeks, and has had an amazing impact within the firm. I also want to acknowledge an initiative Bill is a part of in Bermuda, called ACRE, or the Association for Corporate Racial Equity. This group spends a lot of time speaking to businesses about the benefits of racial equity and enlightening them on how to look for diverse talent properly. The response to this process has been truly inspiring, with the percentage of diversity in the Bermudian financial market constantly increasing towards what it should be. These are just a few initiatives that have started the journey to remove the glass ceiling, and hopefully more will continue to be tested and tried out in the future.

The glass ceiling has been an issue for far too long, and its time of confining minorities is way past its sell by date. I want anyone reading this to keep that in mind as you go about your daily life. If we really are to remove the glass ceiling, we need to go about it in the correct manner. The barriers are different in different places, and so, for a good campaign, we can't just open one door and expect everyone to march through, we need to build thousands of doors, so that everyone can begin their journey when they feel suitable. The actions we do every day are what have made the glass ceiling so engrained within society, and no doubt this will take a while to undo. Nature abhors a vacuum, and if diverse leadership isn't involved in this space, then something else will fill it, and it will almost always be the wrong voices. Throw stuff at the wall and see if it sticks, make it clear why diversity, equity and inclusion is utterly connected to success, help people become ambassadors for inclusion; but most importantly, we need to embrace the change that is coming, and work together confidently to raise awareness and obliterate the glass ceiling once and for all.

A word of advice on how to break through the glass ceiling

Patricia Kabuleeta : Command the respect, own it, and keep the door open

Tara Falk : Be yourself, trust your gut, and look for a mentor

Bill Wharton : We know the glass ceiling is gone when, the diversity you see on the train to work, is the same as the diversity you see when you enter the office, all the way up to the board meetings

David Bamber : What have you got to lose, take risks

Tiernan Brady : To remove the glass ceiling, we need to convince people to be active in this space, without being perfect in this space, get speaking about it!