

# Women in the Military Who Have Shattered the Glass Ceiling: A Phenomenological Study

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## ABSTRACT

Military women in key positions, despite their notable facts, remain low. While initiatives have added chances, women still experience gaps in opportunities and notoriety. This phenomenological study explored the practices and accounts of military women who shattered the glass ceiling. The research question was: What are the personal experiences of retired military women who have broken through the glass ceiling and progressed into authoritative leadership positions? The populace sample included six retired female general officers. This article explores the textural and structural descriptions of the member's experiences, resulting in four themes each member valued as critical. The article concluded that a gap in literature does exist – a clear path is absent in order to break the glass ceiling. The article added to literature, offering a guide for military women to follow. Future research should include all branches of service; all ranks; a more diverse populace; information on women now serving to conclude a change in data since limits on position have been lifted; and a contrast with Generation X and Y.

## KEYWORDS

Discrimination, Gendered Organization, Glass Ceiling, Military Women, Transformational Leadership

## INTRODUCTION

The United States military introduced changes to equal opportunities, such as same-sex marriages and the allowance of gays and lesbians to openly serve in the military. Yet Equal Protection rights for women to serve in all jobs in the military, especially in the combat arms corps, are not as numerous or attainable as reports indicated (Bakkan, 2014). The tradition and the culture of the military prevail, over the law, allowing military commanders the discretionary decision to place the mission's needs first. Stereotypes such as physical demands, the potential increase in sexual assaults, and the possibility of a broad range of harmful consequences, which are unfounded, are some reasons provided for the exclusion of women (Bakken, 2014).

In February 2012, the Pentagon announced women would be permitted to serve in units supporting combat operations, but the Pentagon's announcement provided few benefits to women as they had already been serving in such support related jobs created by the needs of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. In January 2013, the military lifted the blanket exclusion of women in combat units; however, the integration would not begin until three years later. The lifting of the blanket exclusion is important because the vision statement of the 2012 policy read: "the Department of Defense is committed to removing all barriers that would prevent service members from rising to the highest level of

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responsibility that their talents and capabilities warrant” (Bakken, 2014). Bakken (2014) concluded the combat-exclusion policy does not follow the concepts of equality or Equal Protection for women.

Despite the barriers women continue to experience, studies in business show strong connections between organizational performance, profitability, and women in senior leadership positions (Johns, 2013; Hurn, 2012). Johns (2013) postulated studies on women, as business leaders, are fascinating.

The very first practical study linking women to strong performance as executive officers in companies with solid performance is Adler’s (2001) study. This study observed the practices, over a 19-year period (1980 – 1998), of 215 Fortune 500 companies analyzing corporate performance of ethnic and gender diverse boards. Examining four profitable areas (profits of revenues, assets, stockholders’ equity, and company competitiveness) the results concluded that women executives had the highest performance in their industry. The study also established organizations scoring high in the promotion of women were more profitable than their industry median. The results provided a clear pattern – women who worked for companies that showed the strongest records of profitability, were equally as strong in promoting women. Adler’s (2001) study also indicated, as a possible reason for success, top executives in the profitable Fortune 500 companies made smart decisions. Those decisions included the inclusion of women at the executive level, bringing all the talent – the best brains of both men and women – into the executive suites.

Williams, Muller and Kilanski (2012) suggested that although a lot of research on the emergence of gendered organizations exists supporting Acker’s (1990) theoretical claim of gendered organizations, times have changed and so has the social organization of work and organizational logic. Williams et al. (2012) examined geoscientists as participants from the oil and gas industry to explore whether or not Acker’s (1990) gender inequities held true under in the new economy. Work transformations, defined as restructuring, computerization, globalization, and a new economy, have affected the organizational structure in the United States, as well as around the world. Workers were once loyal to one employer whereas now, workers change jobs searching for more promising opportunities as a result of organizational lay-offs, mergers, and corporate downsizing (Williams et al., 2012). Layers of management have been shed in exchange for organized teams that include workers with diverse skills. Career maps that provide individualized schedules of career development replace career ladders characterized as steps that lead to an increase in pay and more responsibility. Networking, inside and outside organizations, now identifies opportunities for advancement.

Although research literature exists on reasons a gender division occurs (LaPierre & Zimmerman, 2012; Johns, 2013; Baker, 2014; Egnell, 2016), few scholars have addressed the development of women breaking through the glass ceiling. The absence of research in this study towards breaking the glass ceiling for women in the military is crucial to the development of women and organizational culture as future women leaders are placed in positions to achieve success. Further examination of how women have managed to break the glass ceiling not only opens opportunities for new women, it provides a new perspective of workplace culture and beliefs to be shared.

The majority of the research findings suggest a masculine bias continues to hinder the progress of women in their advancement to move beyond the glass ceiling (Kanter, 1977, 1993; LaPierre & Zimmerman, 2012; Bielby, Posselt, Jaquette, & Bastedo, 2014). Masculine bias is not just a disadvantage to women now; it is a disadvantage to women in future generations. The continuous experience of constant barriers could potentially discourage future female leaders from capitalizing on their skills and further slow the growth rate of gender diversity in the workforce. Losing future female leaders, due to constant barriers and a less gender diverse workforce, is a loss to organizations looking to change the existing culture, improve gender diversity, and take advantage of the talents women have to offer. Equally as important, creating a gender diverse environment would advance men and women. Men would advance from the archaic masculine leader bias and women would advance as leaders with new attributes to achieve success.

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