The Unconscious Glass Ceiling
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It has been become common belief that the glass ceiling once barring women from the professional world has shattered and that women in our modern day society have equal opportunity when compared to that of men to obtain positions of high pay and status. The reality we live in, however, is one in which women make up only 18.8% of congress (Manning 10) and about 16.9% of corporate board seats (Wallace 1). This lack of women in the public sphere has been blamed by many on the assumption that it is women's lack of interest in these fields that keeps these statistics in place. Though many strides have been made over time to combat gender inequality through legislation, our culture perpetuates sexual discrimination through the upholding of false assumptions based on outdated female archetypes. This popularized, distorted view of womanhood influences many employers, both consciously and unconsciously, in their opinions of both prospective and current female employees—dually preventing them in entering the professional world and leaving them with lack of evidence to pursue litigation.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the first piece of national legislation condemning discrimination in the workplace on the basis of gender, but its original conception did not include a protection against sexual discrimination. Originally, the Act had been drafted without the consideration of gender, but Representative Howard Smith of Virginia proposed its addition—though it is argued whether Smith did it as an act of sympathy toward gender equality or as an attempt to defeat the Act in its entirety (Gregory 26). After its passage, many women still faced restrictive local laws on the basis of gender that dealt with, “working hour laws and prohibitions on night work...[relegating women] to predominantly low-status, low-paying...jobs,” (Aiken, Salmon, and Hanges 387). After the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Congress created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, or EEOC, to handle claims of discrimination that were violations of the Act. However, overwhelmed by the amount of racial discrimination claims, gender discrimination was not actively pursued and
addressed by the EEOC for much of its early years (Gregory 29). This made women's efforts to seek retribution for violations of their newly protected rights difficult, if not impossible.

The idea of a living wage, in its original conception referring to a wage enabling a male worker to support both himself and his family, has embedded in our society the notion that a woman's job is primarily for supplemental income thus perpetuating the assumption that women aren't interested in higher paying positions. In the nineteenth century, the growing popularity of the family wage was a triumph for the working class. At the time, it was a victory in the name of social equality (Milkman 2). However, over time society started to see an increase in the need for additional income, and it became more common for a single woman to live on her own instead of moving straight from her father's home into that of a husband. For many modern day households, it is no longer realistic for a family to survive on one income alone; and the assumption that the female's income is solely for secondary purposes can be detrimental to a family's finances-- particularly those of a single mother. Furthermore, the notion that a female's employment is in conjunction with having a male and a family unit at home is unfair to single working women. In his book *Women and Workplace Discrimination*, Raymond F. Gregory points out that, “women's careers are...likely to be shaped by the job opportunities that employers historically have made available to them,” (19). This presents an ongoing isolation of women from positions of power. Though more women continue to enter the workforce over time, their presence in the professional world has increased at a vastly smaller rate. Women make up a significant amount of the workforce in the United States but are generally more likely to be placed in historically “female positions” such as clerical work, child care services, educational occupations, and domestic work (Gregory 19). If young women aren't finding successful and satisfied female role models in high paying positions or positions of power, they are less likely to set goals to enter the professional world themselves.

Society shows a trend of addressing gender inequality in a manner making it seem less important than other issues pertaining to social equality because it has unfairly attributed gender
differences to biological makeup. Women are viewed as being more passive, emotional, and less physically capable when compared to men due to their very nature. However, Kate Millet reminds us in *Sexual Politics* that, “endocrinology and genetics afford no definite evidence of determining mental-emotional differences (Andreasen and Cudd 40).” It is not proven natural differences that separate the sexes in their capabilities but rather ideas of gendered norms that were created by patriarchal society and perpetuated by traditional practice. Even the notion that men and women have different physical capabilities can in part be attributed to the evolution of men and women that has been encouraged by, “breeding, diet, and exercise...[and] is hardly an adequate category on which to base political relations within civilization (Andreasen and Cudd 39).” If it appears as though biology naturally separates men and women, it becomes easier for patriarchal society to justify not rectifying inequality-- we cannot challenge natural law. The reality is that even physical distinctions between the genders not including genitalia have been altered by patriarchal practice. Patriarchal religion is also often used to explain the historical subjugation of women, claiming that women's inferiority is a result of the divine thus being out of the scope of human intervention by, “constructing a theology whose basic postulates are male supremacist, and one of whose central functions is to uphold and validate the patriarchal structure (Andreasen and Cudd 39).” These arguments are used all too often to alleviate ourselves and our system from blame and, in turn, impose on women the idea that they are eternally flawed by birth.

False stereotypes upholding the assumption that only women put their career second to their family life, whether conscious or not, keep women from being viewed as serious candidates for demanding positions which are usually higher paying. Many employers create positions within their business models requiring an unwavering commitment under the assumption that their “ideal worker” be a man and that his wife will take on the responsibility of child care for the family, if one exists (Gregory 17). Under this archaic assumption, women are often viewed as not wanting to work, not being capable of being as committed to their careers as their male counterparts, being unable to relocate geographically for a potential career opportunity, and being unwilling to work required long hours
Because these general assumptions about the female worker have become ingrained in the minds of employers throughout history, it is easy for an interviewer to unconsciously hold these false stereotypes against a female candidate—proving it more difficult for women to enter the pipeline even at entry level positions.

Highly educated women with equal qualifications are entering the workforce earning less than their male intellectual counterparts thus creating the possibility for them to be paid less for the entirety of their careers. A 2012 *Businessweek* survey reported that female MBA graduates from reputed universities are earning less than male MBA graduates from the same schools: “[women] from the class of 2012 at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, for instance, earned 86 percent of male wages, while those at Stanford Graduate School of Business earned 79 percent,” (Damast 1). The fact that these demographics relate to freshly graduated students with MBAs shows that their perspective wages cannot relate to job performance as they have no experience with the companies at which they’re being hired. Even if some of the male graduates surveyed had previous internships with their respective companies, it is fair to consider that some of the female graduates surveyed completed similar internships as they are being measured based on the fact that they have the same degree from the same university and thus the same employment and educational opportunities. It would be unrealistic and unfair to assume that all of the males had higher grade point averages or better references than their female counterparts. Even more severe than the wage disparity is the fact that the gap is actually beginning to widen over time. *Businessweek* also reports that, “In 2002, women at the top 30 MBA programs earned 98 percent of what males earned,” (Damast 1). So, despite any efforts activists or legislation have made in the name of abolishing the gender wage gap, we face the threat that progress is not being made and that ground has been lost in recent years in our highest grossing industries.

If women are statistically choosing to focus on maternal obligation rather than pursuing white-collar careers, it is in part because society has socialized women to view child rearing and
parenthood as their prevailing purpose. In *Toward a Humanist Justice*, Susan Moller Okin warns us that, “women are made vulnerable by constructing their lives around the expectation that they will be primary parents; they become more vulnerable within marriages in which they fulfill this expectation...and they are most vulnerable in the event of separation or divorce (Andreasen and Cudd 403).” Patriarchal society has historically told women that they should desire to be mothers and that success of our species depends on their desire to do so-- as if women would not continue to populate the Earth with humans if they are not so compelled by force. However, it has fallen short on addressing how a woman is expected to do this in the event that a male is not present to provide for her. If men and women were held equally to the same standards of both child rearing and bread-winning, one party may be found vulnerable in the event of divorce; but the makeup of this party would not fall along gendered lines.

The assumption that a man is willing to surrender total commitment to his job without any regard to the needs of his family is unfair to working fathers who deserve an equal opportunity to participate in their child's development. While it does hold true that the traditional approach to family life has been a wife and mother that is primarily in charge of domestic work-- including child rearing-- in partnership with a father whose primary responsibility is as the home's breadwinner, these archetypes of mother and father are outdated and thus not conducive to the realities of the modern family. A 2014 study in *The Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* shows that, “fathers'...parenting behavior is important for the prevention of child anxiety.” A paternal presence was concluded to also allow a child to be more competitive, independent, and curious (Majdandžić et al. 302)-- qualities a young woman needs if she's going to challenge her traditional gender role and succeed in a professional setting. The assumption that men cannot or do not want to be a part of their child's development is, in itself, gender inequality toward men in the private sphere. This is an issue that needs to be approached with a similar severity to women's inequality in the workplace as it would aid in the abolition of false stereotypes of the difference in capabilities and career goals of female and male workers. In 1981, Jean Bethke
Elshtain postulated in her book *Public Man, Private Woman* that, “if it is the case that women have a distinct moral language...[emphasizing] concern for others, responsibility, care, and obligation...then we must take care to preserve the sphere that makes such a morality of responsibility possible and extend its imperatives to men as well,” (335-6).

Similar in nature are the false stereotypes about a woman's demeanor that make her seem unqualified as a candidate for a position of power, and yet a woman who attempts to combat this by not displaying femininity in the workplace is seen as overly aggressive and hostile. Based on outdated female archetypes, employers may assume that women are not tough enough to succeed in the professional world or in a managerial setting, that women are unable to make decisions, or that women are too emotional. These assumptions date back to a time when the Man of Reason emerged, or “the idea of rationality associated with the rationalist philosophies of the seventeenth century (Andreasen and Cudd 177).” Genevieve Lloyd affirms in *Metaphilosophy* that, “when the Man of Reason is extolled, philosophers are not talking about idealizations of human beings. They are talking about ideals of manhood (Cudd and Andreasen 177).” Though it is possible that, “these false stereotypes arose in an era when brawn was...more highly valued in the workplace than brains,” (Gregory 16) it is inexcusable that they still persist in today's professional work environment-- consciously or not. A woman that has had similar professional development as that of her male colleagues has most certainly been through similar training on professionalism itself, and being able to embody professionalism is not counterproductive to the idea of femininity. Unfortunately, unconscious discrimination based on the perceived professionalism of a woman is difficult to prove from a litigation standpoint unless it is an ongoing company-wide trend.

In the 2008 presidential elections, Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska ran as the Vice Presidential candidate under Senator John McCain-- putting her directly in the path of the public eye as the first female candidate to ever be nominated for the position by the Republican party (Meeks 522). During this time, “Palin had over 50% more search queries via major online search engines than any other
candidate-- vice presidential or presidential,” (McCarver 58). The American public became obsessed with the idea of a physically attractive, conservative feminist. In their article, “Have You Come a Long Way, Baby? Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, and Sexism in 2008 Campaign Coverage,” Diana B. Carlin and Kelly L. Winfrey mention that, “female candidates often receive less issue coverage than males, but more coverage on appearance, personality, and family,” (329). The first female candidate to ever run for the office of Vice President was Geraldine Ferraro who was introduced to the Democratic National Council by news anchorman Tom Browkaw in 1984 as, “Geraldine Ferraro...The first woman to be nominated for vice president...Size 6,” (qtd. in Carlin and Winfrey 329). Similarly, in Sarah Palin's case, her fame brought more attention to her body than it did her political career after it was released that she had participated in beauty pageants and was runner up for Miss Alaska. She was widely publicized as being unintelligent and criticized in a pornographic manner by the media. Palin even suffered the humiliation of having a blow-up doll created to look like her so that men could, “show her how they're going to vote,” (Carlin and Winfrey 330). Because the public is likely to be more informed of the marital status or clothing size of a female candidate than of her actual political views, women in politics face a greater obstruction to their own credibility than male candidates.

Palin’s openness to her display of femininity led to the public treating her as though she lacked credibility on the pure basis of being regarded as a physically attractive woman; but because female politicians have little options in the way of discourse against public opinion, she was put in a position where she felt it necessary to down-play these obstacles. Palin offered to CBS's Katie Couric, “I'm a feminist who believes in equal rights and I believe that women certainly today have every opportunity that a man has to succeed,” (qtd. in McCarver 60). Had Sarah Palin been a man, there may have been a certain limited degree of scrutiny over physical appearance; but attractiveness would not have been linked to credibility-- or, rather, lack thereof-- as a politician and intellectual, and the public's knowledge of her actual political platforms would have been more easily accessible. However, as a conservative, Palin may have offered this sentiment based on her political platform that less regulation
in the labor market is necessary--avoiding a conflict between her own personal statements and voting record. Regardless, this bit of dishonesty is detrimental to the development of the young female professional. Young women need to understand the adversity that they face so that they might better handle and combat it in the future, and patriarchy is alive and well not needing such validation. In an earlier interview, Palin offered, “[F]air or unfair, it is there. I think that's reality, and I think it's a given...work harder, prove yourself to an even greater degree that you're capable, that you're going to be the best candidate,” (qtd. in Carlin and Winfrey 327). This is a much more realistic and feminist statement. So, why the change from a feminist viewpoint to one of silence? If we take a look at Palin's female predecessor in the 2008 presidential elections, we see a possible explanation for why Palin might want to downplay gender inequality while at the same time emphasizing her femininity to certain media sources.

Hillary Clinton's success in becoming the first woman to have ever won a presidential primary election (Meeks 522) was a victory for women seeking positions in public service, but the media’s attacks on Clinton for being overly aggressive sends a message that even the most successful female candidates for the highest public office will be judged on the basis of how society perceives femininity. Character issues of a potential candidate for political office are often equally as important as that candidate's political stances in the eyes of a voter (Meeks 523). Because women are often viewed as maternal beings, they are seen in a more emotional light. This can be an advantage in that women are thought to be more capable of compassion than a male candidate, but backfires when a woman is seen in a negative context of maternity: “scolding, punishment, or shrewish behavior.” In addition, “Women who exhibit too many masculine traits are often ridiculed and lose trust because they are going against type,” (Carlin and Winfrey 328). Members of the social media condemned Clinton for not being feminine enough, they held that her presence in office was threatening to men as a collective, and even accused her of only being successful because of the publicity surrounding former President Bill Clinton's sex scandal. Ken Rudin, an editor for National Public Radio, compared Clinton to, “the
demoniac, knife-wielding stalker played by Glenn Close in Fatal Attraction,” (qtd. in Carlin and Winfrey 331). Donny Deutch of CNBC criticized Clinton's public image by stating, “men can take in a woman in power and women can celebrate a woman in power. Hillary Clinton didn’t figure it out. She didn’t put a skirt on,” (qtd. in Carlin and Winfrey 338).

Often times, female political candidates are described using terms referring to inanimate objects or animals as an attempt to dehumanize their existence. The holiday season during the election brought the creation of a Hillary Clinton nutcracker in which nuts could be cracked between Clinton's open legs (Carlin and Winfrey 337)-- personifying the idea that Clinton was aiming to crush male genitals. An image of Clinton circulated that was made to look like Barack Obama's campaign posters replacing his common calls to action of “Change,” “Progress,” or “Hope,” with the title the media was all too fond of using to refer to her as-- “Bitch,” a female canine. When a male candidate is overly aggressive, we might see him portrayed as “power hungry” or call him unrealistic in his scope of the capabilities his office might grant him; but he is nonetheless assigned traits that we associate with a human being. Females, identified by common stereotypes, are looked at as companions-- pets, if you will. When one hears a woman referred to as a “bitch,” it conjures up the idea that she is deviating from her role as man's best friend. Symbolic annihilation of realistic women in the media, or their lack of presence in media in both a real and fictional context, makes them seem unrelatable and unimportant by dehumanizing them as beings; and, in doing so, perpetuates the belief that women are not capable of existing in a white collared world. While women gain ground in gender equality politically, they continue to lose the status of actual humanity in the public eye.

While legislation has tried to ensure that women are not oppressed by societal practice, it fails to address the psychological oppression of women that is perpetuated by the media and societal interactions. Sandra Bartky defines psychological oppression in Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression as, “institutionalized and systematic; it serves to make the work of domination easier by breaking the spirit of the dominated and by rendering them incapable of
understanding the nature of those agencies responsible for their subjugation (Andreasen and Cudd 105).” Bartky shows us that women are fragmented into different pieces of a person that are used to judge her value and worth to society separately—namely her body. By allowing women to self-objectify, patriarchal society is denying young women the opportunity to desire to be powerful by overwhelming them with the idea that their value is solely dependent upon their appearance. In popular culture, a man's success isn't solely measured by his ability to procure money and power but also by his ability to access the female body— an unrealistic model of the female body, at that.

Similarly, characteristics assigned to femininity—passivity, excess emotion— are said to dictate the way that females behave in the professional world. Bartky reminds us that “it can hardly be expected that those who hold a set of stereotyped beliefs about the sort of [people women are] will understand [their] needs or respect [their] rights (Andreasen and Cudd 106).” When a politician, media source, or sociological study claims that women simply do not wish to enter certain career fields, they are basing this upon the assumption that women are made up of a fragmented identity created by patriarchal society; and they are mystifying the rest of us into believing that it is somehow inherent in woman's very nature and not the effect of the psychological oppression women face.

Young girls are not exempt from the idea that their existence revolves around their bodies. Animated movies meant for young children display images of female characters wearing revealing or tight clothing in order to emphasise sexuality and make it synonymous with femininity. This kind of exposure teaches women that, “how their bodies look may be more important than their emotional state or physical capabilities,” (Erchull, Liss, and Lichiello 583). Constantly viewing women as sexual objects in the media causes women to self-objectify, or internalize these public views and treat themselves as sexual objects. Women who self-objectify have also found to be more likely to engage in self-harm or mutilation as a way to, “punish [their] bodies for not living up to the standards of body perfection that young women have seen in the media,” (Erchull, Liss, and Lichiello 585). This kind of behavior is often seen on a gender blind basis in the case of victims of trauma (Erchull, Liss, and
Lichiello 583). By showing young women that their most valuable asset is their appearance and how attractive it is to a man, we are teaching them that gender inequality is a social norm thereby making them complacent to the inequality they might face in the future.

By accepting the current portrayal of women in the media, we are raising young men to believe that masculine culture is the reality they will face when entering the professional world. This sets men up for failure in a professional environment where he is required by law to see women as equal. How can we expect our male population to not sexually discriminate against women when they are systematically shown by the media and validated by society that it is natural to do so? Gregory reminds us that, “male managers-- still primarily responsible for most hiring and other workplace decisions-- are more likely to attribute to other men than to women the qualities and characteristic they deem necessary for a position,” (17). This kind of discrimination can be difficult to prove in that it is not blatant; and, without concrete evidence, women who seek litigation on the basis of sexual discrimination will likely fail in their attempts to do so.

Our society has lost its ability to control the kinds of messages and images to which we are exposed, and thus it has become our responsibility to filter these messages for ourselves. Men and women both suffer because of society's undeniable guilt in stifling progress. The idea that unconscious discrimination should be automatically forgiven or excused needs to be rejected, and legislation needs to be presented to hold those who are guilty of it accountable. We need to hold each other to the same standard that we would hold an employer, and we need to fight for that standard to become the societal norm. Silence is not an acceptable course of action if anything is to improve. Educating ourselves on the crimes against humanity that the media tells us is an acceptable reality needs to be paramount. We are lucky to live in an ever-changing, modern society that constantly challenges human capability on multiple forefronts. It is time to challenge ourselves to view one another with respect and admiration, not for assumptions based on gender archetypes, but on the assumption that we all have the ability to not let the media dictate our thoughts and actions-- regardless of which letters make up our
chromosomes.

**Works Cited**


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