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BREAKING THE INTERNAL GLASS CEILING: THE ROLE OF CAREER ADAPTABILITY AMONG YOUNG WORKING WOMEN IN KERALA

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of career adaptability in influencing the internal glass ceiling among young working women in Kerala, with particular attention to differences based on marital status. The internal glass ceiling refers to the self-imposed psychological and behavioural barriers that restrict women's career advancement. Primary data were collected from 223 respondents using a structured questionnaire and statistical tools such as independent samples t-test and Pearson correlation analysis were employed. The findings indicated that unmarried women exhibit relatively higher levels of internal glass ceiling compared to married women, highlighting the influence of career stage and perceived uncertainty in shaping internal constraints. Further, the study reveals a strong negative and statistically significant relationship between career adaptability and internal glass ceiling suggesting that women with higher adaptability experience lower internal barriers. The results underscore the importance of enhancing career adaptability through targeted organizational interventions such as training, mentoring and skill development initiatives.

KEYWORDS: *Internal Glass Ceiling, Career Adaptability, Women Employees, Psychological Barriers, Career Development*

INTRODUCTION

Career development has become highly difficult in today's dynamic work environment especially for women pursuing professional positions in the IT industry. Even after significant advancements in gender equality, the persistence of the internal glass ceiling continues to restrict women's career advancement. The term "internal glass ceiling" describes self-imposed psychological barriers that keep women from pursuing top-level positions, such as lack of confidence, fear of failure and limited career aspirations. These internal limitations, in contrast to structural barriers, have their roots in personal perceptions and are frequently impacted by organizational culture and societal expectations.

Career adaptability serves as an essential concept in in how individuals navigate career transitions and obstacles. It refers to a person's readiness and ability to cope with current and anticipated vocational tasks, transitions and uncertainties (Savickas, 1997). Career adaptability consists of four key dimensions: concern, control, curiosity and confidence according to Savickas (1997). These dimensions enhance individuals' capacity to develop the mental resources to handle career progression and adapt to changes in the work environment.

In the context of women employees, particularly in the IT sector, career adaptability plays a significant role in overcoming internalized barriers. Women who are greater adaptable often demonstrate higher confidence, make independent career decisions and overcome internal barriers associated with the internal glass ceiling. On the contrary, women with lower adaptability often face greater hesitation, weakened self-belief and unwillingness to

seek leadership positions. This is consistent with the study by Eagly and Carli (2007), who indicate that women's career progression is influenced by a combination of external obstacles and internal constraints.

The IT sector has witnessed a steady increase in female workforce participation over the years. Despite increased workforce participation, the proportion of women in top leadership roles remains low, indicating the influence of both apparent and underlying barriers. While organizational policies and structural inequalities have been widely studied, there is a growing need to explore internal psychological factors such as the internal glass ceiling that may hinder women's advancement.

Therefore, the study aims to determine the relationship between career adaptability and the internal glass ceiling among women working in the IT sector. By doing so, the research seeks to contribute to the existing literature on career development and gender studies, while also providing insights for organizations to design strategies that enhance women's career growth and leadership participation.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the increasing participation of women in the IT sector, their representation in higher managerial and leadership positions remains disproportionately low. Despite significant research on organizational barriers limited research has focused on the internal psychological constraints affecting women's advancement. Women often struggle with self-doubt and reduced confidence in pursuing advanced roles, which together form the basis of the internal glass ceiling.

In this regard, career adaptability significantly influences individuals' ability to respond to career-related challenges and opportunities. However, there is a lack of empirical research examining how career adaptability influences the internal glass ceiling among women employees, particularly in the IT sector in Kerala. Hence, this research attempts to fill this gap by examining the relationship between career adaptability and the internal glass ceiling, providing a deeper understanding of psychological constraints affecting women's career progression.

OBJECTIVES

1. To assess the level of career adaptability and internal glass ceiling among young working women.
2. To examine whether there is a significant difference in internal glass ceiling among women with different levels of career adaptability.
3. To analyse whether marital status leads to significant differences in internal glass ceiling among women employees.
4. To investigate the association between career adaptability and internal glass ceiling.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Herminia Ibarra et al. (2013) highlighted how internalized gender norms and self-limiting beliefs constrain women's leadership aspirations. The findings indicated that even within supportive environments, women may limit their career progression as a result of internalized beliefs.

The work of Madeline E. Heilman (2018) analyzed the impact of gender stereotypes and their psychological impact on women's career advancement. The research found that internalized workplace stereotypes result in lower self-promotion and hesitation in seeking leadership roles among women.

Andreas Hirschi (2018) highlighted the impact of career adaptability in shaping career development within rapidly changing work settings. The research found that individuals with high adaptability tend to be more future-oriented and have a proactive behaviour which helps in the career growth and minimizes reluctance toward leadership roles.

Nele De Cuyper et al. (2019) investigated the role of career competencies particularly adaptability, in influencing career success. The research found that higher career adaptability exhibits greater control over their career paths and are less likely to experience stagnation. The results suggested that higher adaptability enhances proactive career behavior, which can help reduce internal barriers to growth.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

The data required for the study were collected from both primary and secondary sources.

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Primary Data

Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire designed based on the objectives of the study. The questionnaire included items related to career adaptability and internal glass ceiling. It was distributed among women employees working in the IT sector in Kerala, particularly in Infopark.

Secondary data were collected from books, journals, research articles, websites and other published sources.

Sample Design

A structured questionnaire was prepared and distributed among women IT employees to collect relevant information for the study.

Sample Population

The population of the study consists of young women employees working in the IT sector in Kerala, particularly those employed in major IT parks such as Infopark.

Sample Size

The sample size of the study is 223 respondents. The sample size was determined using Cochran's formula and was further adjusted based on feasibility and accessibility of respondents.

Sampling Technique

The sampling technique used for selecting respondents is non-probability sampling. Under this method, convenience sampling was adopted to collect data from women employees who were easily accessible in IT organizations.

Tools for Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using appropriate statistical tools and presented with the help of tables and charts for better interpretation.

The following tools were used:

- Simple Percentage Analysis
- One-way ANOVA
- Independent Sample t-test
- Correlation

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the analysis of the data collected from women employees in the IT sector working in Infopark. The results are interpreted to understand the influence of career adaptability on the internal glass ceiling among respondents in Kerala.

Percentage Analysis

Table 1: Demographic Profile-Age distribution

Age	Frequency	Percentage
22-25	26	11.7%
26-30	125	56.1%
31-35	72	32.3%
Total	**223**	**100%**

Source: Primary data

Interpretation

The data indicates that a majority of respondents (56.1%) belong to the 26–30 age group, followed by 32.3% in the 31–35 age group. A smaller proportion (11.7%) falls within the 22–25 age category. This suggests that most respondents are largely concentrated in the early and mid-career phases, which is appropriate for studying internal barriers and career progression.

Table 2: Demographic profile -Marital status of the respondents

Marital status	Frequency	Percentage
Married	182	81.6%
Unmarried	41	18.4%
Total	**223**	**100%**

Source: Primary data

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Interpretation
The data reveals that a majority of respondents (81.6%) are married, while only 18.4% are unmarried. The dominance of married participants may play a role in shaping perceptions of career stability and internal barriers.

Table 3: Demographic profile – Work experience

Work Experience	Frequency	Percentage
Less than1 year	15	6.7%
1-3 years	21	9.4%
3-5 years	96	43%
More than 5 years	91	40.8%
Total	**223**	**100%**

Source: Primary data

Interpretation
The findings show that most respondents have moderate to high work experience, with 43% having 3–5 years of experience and 40.8% having more than 5 years. A smaller proportion includes 9.4% with 1–3 years and only 6.7% with less than 1 year of experience. The presence of experienced respondents adds credibility to the analysis of career progression and internal limitations.

Table 4: Demographic profile -Job level

Job Level	Frequency	Percentage
Entry level	25	11.2%
Mid-level	198	88.8%
Total	**223**	**100%**

Source: Primary data

Interpretation
The data indicates that a vast majority of respondents (88.8%) are at the mid-level, while only 11.2% are at the entry level. The sample includes individuals with advancing careers, making it suitable for analyzing internal glass ceiling and leadership perceptions.

Reliability
The Cronbach's alpha values for career adaptability (0.974) and internal glass ceiling (0.977) reflect exceptionally high internal consistency, so both scales are considered highly dependable for further statistical analysis

ANOVA Test
H1: There is no significant difference in internal glass ceiling among women with different levels of career adaptability.
H2: There is significant difference in internal glass ceiling among women with different levels of career adaptability.

Table 5: ANOVA Analysis showing different levels of career adaptability

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	330.888	2	165.444	537.084	.000
Within Groups	67.769	220	.308		
Total	398.657	222			

Source: Primary data

Interpretation
The ANOVA result shows that the siginificance value is 0.00 which is less than 0.5. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected and alternative hypothesis (H1) is accepted. So, it can be concluded that career adaptability significantly influences the internal glass ceiling among women.

Table 6: Homogeneous Subsets for Internal Glass Ceiling (Tukey B Test)

Career Adaptability Level	N	Subset 1	Subset 2	Subset 3
High	78	1.8901		
Medium	2		3.6190	
Low	143			4.4505

Source: Primary survey

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Interpretation

The results highlight that internal glass ceiling varies across different levels of career adaptability. Respondents with high career adaptability tend to have lower internal barriers (mean = 1.8901), whereas those with lower adaptability report greater internal barriers (mean = 4.4505). This implies as career adaptability decreases, internal glass ceiling increases, with subgroup distinctions confirming statistical significance.

t- test

H1: There is no significant difference in internal glass ceiling based on marital status.

H2: There is significant difference in internal glass ceiling based on marital status.

Table 7: Independent Samples t-test Showing Mean Difference with Respect to Marital Status

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	t-value	df	p-value
Internal glass ceiling	Married	182	3.4678	1.3913	-2.277	77.185	0.026
	Unmarried	41	3.9013	1.0247			

Source: Primary Survey

Interpretation

An independent samples t-test was conducted to determine whether internal glass ceiling varies between married and unmarried women. The analysis revealed a significant variation in internal glass ceiling between married and unmarried women ($t = -2.277$, $df = 77.185$, $p = 0.026$). This indicates that marital status plays a crucial role in in shaping women's internal constraints. Higher internal barriers among unmarried women (mean=3.9013) may be linked to early career stages, along with limited experience and concerns about maintaining work-life balance in the future.

Correlation Analysis

H1: There is no significant association between career adaptability and internal glass ceiling

H2: There is a significant association between career adaptability and internal glass ceiling

Table 8: Pearson Correlation between Career Adaptability and Internal Glass Ceiling

Variables	Career Adaptability	Internal Glass Ceiling
Career Adaptability	1	-0.912**
Internal Glass Ceiling	-0.912**	1
Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
N	**223**	**223**

Source: Primary survey

Table 9: Regression analysis

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	F Value	Sig.
1	0.912	0.832	0.831	0.55031	1095.379	0.000

Source: Primary survey

Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted and the results indicated a strong negative relationship between career adaptability and internal glass ceiling ($r = -0.912$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that as career adaptability increases internal glass ceiling decreases. The regression results demonstrates that career adaptability is a significant predictor of internal glass ceiling, accounting for 83.2% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.832$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that adaptability is essential in reducing internal psychological obstacles

FINDINGS

The results provide meaningful insights into the psychological aspects of the internal glass ceiling, among women with a focus on career adaptability and marital status. The findings reveal that internal constraints are deeply connected to individual mindsets, adaptability levels and socio-personal factors.

Women exhibiting strong adaptability experience fewer internal limitations, highlighting adaptability as a key personal strength. This supports the idea that adaptable individuals tend to be more resilient and proactive, thereby helping individuals overcome self-imposed constraints. A noteworthy insight is observed across marital status contradicting the assumption that married women face greater constraints.

Unmarried women, are more likely to experience uncertainty and apprehension about future role expectations, particularly regarding work-life balance. These factors may contribute to heightened internal barriers. Career adaptability is shown to be an effective mechanism that enables women to overcome internal constraints and strengthen their leadership ambitions.

SUGGESTION

Based on the findings, the study suggests that organizations should adopt strategies to improve career adaptability among women through focused development programs. Such programs can enable women to strengthen their confidence, improving resilience and reducing internal constraints.

Organizations may prioritize early-career and unmarried women through career counselling and psychological assistance to reduce uncertainty and self-doubt. Encouraging support systems through peer networks and family-friendly policies can assist women in managing dual roles effectively.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the internal glass ceiling is significantly driven by psychological and behavioural aspects, especially career adaptability. Women who exhibit greater adaptability face significantly fewer internal barriers, underscoring the importance of individual competencies.

The analysis suggests that unmarried women face higher internal barriers than married women, suggesting that career stage and perceived uncertainty play a significant role in shaping internal constraints. Improving adaptability and ensuring organizational support can significantly help women overcome the internal glass ceiling and achieve professional growth.

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