

## WHY DOES THE GLASS CEILING PERSIST?

By Carlota Tyler

At a recent convocation of alumni in the School of Public Policy at Harvard University, a handful of international women leaders spoke in glowing rhetoric about the future of women in leadership positions and what the women there needed to do to become “a player”, to quote one. One participant said, “I’m tired of hearing about the promise of the future. While a few of us have advanced to upper levels of decision-making, why haven’t more of us made it to the top? Why does the glass ceiling persist?” Indeed, forty years after passage of the Civil Rights Act that included females in access to education and job advancement<sup>1</sup>, barriers to women’s full acceptance, as leaders still exist. While females constitute fifty-one per cent of the population and forty-seven percent of the workforce, only twelve percent are seated in Congress and two percent head Fortune 500 corporations. These numbers have remained steady for a decade. And the pattern does not appear to be improving in young industries. Women were barely two percent of the CEO’s leading the dot com revolution. Considering that women constitute fifty-five percent of college graduates and nearly forty-five percent of professional school grads, what is blocking women’s advancement?

### BLAME IT ON BELIEFS

Ancient, deeply embedded and largely unconscious beliefs are getting in the way of women’s progress today. The way people think about one another, the values we hold, the world view that tells us the way things are supposed to be are found in the major religions of the world. Universally among the major faiths, females are described as “less than” and subordinate to males. Further, women have been defined as “purdah”, “unclean”, not fit to speak in The Temple. These beliefs, ingrained in childhood, are at the core of why women are finding it difficult both to be accepted and to believe in the “rightness” of their being at the top, or the “rightness” of another woman as president.

### DEEP AND ANCIENT ROOTS

Where do these beliefs come from? All of the major religions carry a defect message for females. The Judeo-Christian tradition defines females as less valuable than males. Each day an observant Jewish male awakens to thank God he was not born a female. In Orthodox temples women must sit apart from men and are not allowed to add their voices to the service. In Christian tradition, Eve is blamed for the fall from grace that resulted in expulsion from Paradise. This creation myth justified male domination, ownership and control of females and the concept that this was the divine and natural state of the human species. The lowest ranking Buddhist monk outranks the senior ranked Buddhist nun. Muslim females over the age of menarche must fast an extra week during the month-long ritual of Ramadan because they are considered unclean when menstruating. In the Hindu tradition, girls are subject to arranged marriages, their families must produce expensive dowries and, until recently, widows were expected to

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<sup>1</sup> The Civil Rights Act of 1964

commit ritual suttee, throwing themselves on their husband's funeral pyre.

## PERVASIVE AND POLITICAL

The religious roots of the "patris-archy", or father-right, male dominant system is both global and political.<sup>1</sup> As Shelia Collins<sup>ii</sup> writes: "Theology is ultimately political. The way human communities determine good and evil has more to do with the power dynamics of the social systems which create the theologies than with the spontaneous revelation of truth."

The major religious credo and traditions constructed a worldview of male primacy and provided a justification for the "natural order" of the subordination, the invisibility of women in society.

Stephen Lewis, U.N. Special Envoy for HIV-AIDS in Africa when commenting on the disproportionate numbers of females being infected with AIDS was recently quoted: "Why was it only in 2003 that a U.N. Task Force on the plight of women in Southern Africa was appointed? Why did it take until 2004 to form a Global Coalition on Women and AIDS? Why have we allowed a continuing pattern of sexual carnage so grave as to lose an entire generation of women and girls?" This is a core question. Why, indeed!

It was not always this way. God became male, eclipsing the pre-existing balance of an earth mother goddess and her male consort, during the great migratory movements of Indo-Aryans out of the glacial steppes and into the Mediterranean and Western Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century BC. By 200 AD, Christian doctrine had firmly established a male-based hierarchy in a creation story that told us that, not only had God created man first, but He put him in charge. In Genesis "man shall have dominion over" and "subdue" women, children, animals, and the fishes of the sea<sup>2</sup>. It is not a great leap from this male-dominant platform, which forms the basis for our belief systems, our laws and our customs, to the fact that men continue to head 98% of the public and private sector organizations in the world.

From the taproot of religious tradition, a pervasive negativity spread. A negativity that defined women not only as subordinate to men but in their very essence, flawed. Aristotle's idea of the utopian society described women as fundamentally unfit to lead. Christian theologians from St. Augustine to the Inquisitors saw women as a temptation of the devil and corruptors of men. Sigmund Freud said that females were incomplete males whose identity formation was stunted by penis envy. Piaget, an early childhood education researcher, labeled girls at play as passive because that was their nature, while boys were seen as taking initiative and risks for the same reason. Until the latter part of the Twentieth Century, women and children were the legal property of the male head of the house in North America. In many parts of the world, these laws are still in effect. Is it any wonder, with these beliefs ingrained in childhood that men are finding it difficult to accept women at the top and that women have difficulty seeing themselves as leaders in arenas of decision-making.

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 1:26, The Holy Bible.

## BLOOD RITES: BELIEFS AS A BARRIER TO LEADERSHIP

The application of these beliefs on a day-to-day basis set a pattern whereby women and girls were considered defective, a burden, their natural functions a defilement. . The most pervasive and least acknowledged is the issue of menses. What sets the scene for cultural taboos is the fact that the female of the species bleeds on a regular, monthly cycle when not pregnant or ill. The culturally proscribed traditions that separate females from the company of males generally do not attain the cultural clout of taboo until the female attains menarche, or bleeds. The separation is based in Judeo-Christian and Muslim tradition on the interpretation of that natural act as rendering the woman unclean. Menstrual blood is seen as defiling to the male, endangering his strength, making his weapons and tools useless. Blood rites are common in Muslim, Christian and Jewish traditions. All prescribe purification rituals for females after menarche and childbirth. The fact that females bleed and do not die resulted in a critical distinction among all societies. Women were either honored for their procreative powers, or they were debased for their biological function. In most modern cultures, women's biological functions have been used as an excuse for denying them full participation on the world stage.

### **The Performance Issue**

A Gubernatorial candidate in New Hampshire, Arne Arneson, was asked by a male voter in the audience: "That was a great speech, but don't you think the fact that you have a period one week each month will get in the way of your being an effective governor?" Arne's response was an example of a politician's quick wit. "I'm glad you think my performance here tonight was exemplary. I'm menstruating right now. Imagine what I can do the other three weeks." She did not win election but she won the hearts of the women in the room.

The view of menstruation as a barrier to women's performance is not limited to the man in the street. This misperception is held at the highest levels and influences succession planning on a daily basis. When asked why women were not advancing to top levels in his organization, the CEO of a communications industry giant, replied that his Board of Directors and stockholders would hold him accountable if he advanced a candidate whose decisions would be unreliable for one week out of every month.

### **Access Issues**

These comments reveal the belief that women are essentially flawed and biologically unfit to lead. This belief appears to be widespread among males. If it is also widely held by top organization decision-makers, still predominately male, it would explain the persistence of the glass ceiling and, if unchallenged, will constitute an invisible barrier to women's access to positions of leadership for some time to come.

Beliefs underlie behavior and arise from early cultural conditioning in our families of origin, in the traditions held by our ethnic communities, in the tenets taught by religious faiths. Beliefs can be seen at the root of the current under-utilization of the other half of the global brain trust. Not only are U.S. women gaining degrees, an education differential favoring women is a worldwide phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> So, too, is the phenomenon of exclusion of women from top management positions.

In the U.S., when women first gained access to higher education and advancement in jobs with a future in mainstream organizations, they were told that they lacked the experience and credentials for management. Now, nearly forty years later, women are still being told to wait. But women are not waiting. Women-owned companies increased over 400% in the last decade and created more jobs in the U.S. than the Fortune 500 corporations. Women are leaving corporate America at twice the rate of men. This trend is seen in Europe and Southeast Asia as women entrepreneurs are the majority of the new business enterprise.

The extremely competitive business environment forces transnational firms to select carefully from among the very best knowledge workers available. The opportunity cost of prejudice, of rejecting women and limiting selection to men, is much higher than in previous economic environments. Corporations cannot afford the loss some of their best and brightest human resources because of largely unconscious beliefs that limit their use of this substantial resource. As *Fortune* succinctly stated, "No company can afford to waste valuable brainpower simply because it's wearing a skirt." (18:56)

It is at the level of beliefs that our work as societal change agents must take place if we are to guarantee that our nieces, daughters and granddaughters receive the rights and privileges that accrue to their brothers, fathers and cousins.

To dance on the crest of the next wave, to regain balance in a world depleted by the absence of the authentic female voice, we must examine the beliefs that underlie behaviors that limit full utilization of all of our human resources.

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<sup>i</sup> Woman Culture and Society, Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, ed., 1974, pg. 3, 70. Women anthropologists who found that every culture they studied were patriarchally structured.

<sup>ii</sup> Collins, Shelia, quoted from Merlin Stone's When God Was a Woman, 1976, pg.66.

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<sup>3</sup> Competitive Frontiers: Women Managing Across Borders, Adler, N.J. & Izraeli, D.H. Pub. Blackwell Business, UK, 1994, pg. 23.