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Perceived Glass Ceiling as a Predictor of Cognitive Failure among First-Generation Female Lawyers

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Abstract: *"Verdicts shape society; petitions seek justice. Yet some invisible battles evade the light, fought in silence behind an unseen mask. Are the defenders of justice still trapped behind glass?"* The phenomenon of the glass ceiling has been extensively studied in relation to career advancement and leadership, its influence on everyday cognitive functioning has received comparatively less attention. Therefore, the present study was conducted to examine whether perceived glass ceiling predicts cognitive failure among first-generation female lawyers in India. A sample of 70 first-generation female lawyers was collected using the Snowball sampling technique. Perceived Glass Ceiling was measured using a researcher-developed Perceived Glass Ceiling measurement tool, while Cognitive Failure was assessed using the Cognitive Failures Questionnaire 2.0 (CFQ 2.0) developed by Goodhew and Edwards (2024). Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and simple linear regression analysis. The findings revealed that perceived glass ceiling significantly predicted cognitive failure ($R = .398$, $R^2 = .158$, $B = 1.28$, $t = 3.57$, $p < .01$), indicating that higher perceptions of career-related barriers were associated with greater cognitive failures. The findings suggest that the glass ceiling is not merely a barrier to professional growth but also a psychological experience that may influence the everyday cognitive functioning of women in the legal profession. The present study highlights that the consequences of the glass ceiling extend beyond career progression, influencing the everyday cognitive experiences of women striving to establish themselves within the legal profession.

Keywords: *Glass Ceiling, Cognitive Failure, First-Generation Female Lawyers, feminism*

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1. Introduction

Arguably, *"There is an existing problem bigger than the systematic but invisible discrimination, that is being unaware of its very existence,"* but systematic discrimination cannot be either completely addressed by Piecemeal Social Engineering which is given by *Popper (1957)* that advocates for addressing societal problems through small, incremental, and experimental changes because to address societal problems including prejudice or systematic oppression, it becomes necessary to look beyond generalizations, and the better way to find out is to enquire.

Global Reports

According to Gender Gap Report by World Economic Forum (2025), which evaluates gender gap among 4 dimensions has ranked India in (i) Economic Participation and Opportunity for females at 144 out of 148, (ii) Educational Attainment of females at 110 out of 148, (iii) Health and Survival of females at 143 out of 148 and (iv) Political Empowerment of females at 69 out of 148.

Also, as per Sustainable Development Goals SDG by United Nations (2023) worldwide report, it would take an estimated 140 years for women to be represented equally in positions of power and leadership in the workplace and 47 years to achieve equal representation in national parliaments, despite the fact that females represent half of the world population.

Glass Ceiling

The term has been given by Loden, M. (1978). *Feminine leadership, or how to succeed in business without being one of the boys*. Times Books. This term has metaphorically used the word "ceiling" to symbolically present a barrier and "glass" to reflect its transparent nature which can be interpreted as what is not visible in the structure but often happens. According to the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995), the glass ceiling refers to invisible organizational barriers that prevent qualified individuals from advancing to higher positions. This conceptualization has subsequently been expanded by Cotter et al. (2001) and Eagly and Carli (2007). The most important characteristic of glass ceiling is its ability to stay undetectable or unnoticeable within the legal or written policies of an organization, in simple words it is something that is not often a part of official rulebooks but still exists, despite not being written in the policies. The consequences of this invisible prejudice are not limited to a particular industry or stream but are silently active and spread across multiple fields or industries, but the roots do share similarities with the generational enculturation of fixation with hardwired gender roles.

i. ***Gender Role Theory:*** Gender Role Theory proposed by Eagly (1987) suggests that society assigns different behavioural expectations to men and women. The theory attributes assertiveness, independence, and leadership to men, whereas warmth, nurturance, and cooperation are more commonly attributed to women.

ii. ***Stereotype Threat Theory:*** Proposed by Steele and Aronson (1995) states that individuals may underperform when they fear confirming a negative stereotype about their social group. The anxiety generated by this fear can impair cognitive performance and confidence.

iii. ***Tokenism Theory:*** Proposed by Kanter (1977) suggests that individuals who are members of underrepresented groups within an organization may experience increased visibility, increased performance pressure and social isolation due to their minority status.

Cognitive Failure

The word "COGNITION" has originated from the Latin verb COGNOSCIERE which means "getting to know" or "recognize."

In day-to-day life cognitive functioning plays the central role in an individual's ability to think, reason and act efficiently and accurately. Drawing upon the works of Baddeley (1992), Miyake et al. (2000) and Diamond (2013), individuals require continuous attention, memory, perception, and executive functions to complete routine tasks, solve problems, and make appropriate decisions wherever and whenever needed.

Although our cognitive processes work automatically and efficiently, individuals occasionally experience minor lapses in attention, memory, action or coordination, these cognitive lapses are also known as cognitive failure.

The term "Cognitive failure" was introduced by Broadbent, et al. (1982) who defined it as the tendency of a human to commit minor errors in perception, memory and motor functioning during everyday activities, but it cannot be attributed to lack of knowledge or ability. Referring to intellectual limitations, cognitive failures present temporary breakdown in information processing, attentional control or executive functioning that occur during routine tasks. These breakdowns are generally non-clinical but may have the ability to significantly influence personal, academic, and occupational performance when experienced frequently. Cognitive failures are unintentional errors that occur during everyday activities. But, repeated cognitive failures or lapses may accumulate and negatively affect productivity, decision-making, and workplace efficiency.

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According to the works of Kahneman (1973) and Eysenck et al. (2007) the main elements that lead to cognitive failures are not completely exogenous elements but also include internal elements, that are sleep deprivation, fatigue, psychological stress, anxiety, emotional distress, excessive workload, mental exhaustion, and attentional overload. Also, the cognitive failures are closely associated with deficits in executive functioning which includes planning, inhibitory control, working memory, cognitive flexibility, sustained attention, and self-monitoring. These higher-order cognitive processes regulate and control goal-directed behavior and enable individuals to respond and adapt effectively to changing environmental demands. Impairments or deficits in executive functioning may reduce an individual's capacity to allocate attention efficiently, suppress irrelevant information and monitor ongoing performance, thereby contributing to cognitive failures, referring to the works of Miyake et al. (2000) and Diamond (2013).

i. ***Attentional Control Theory:*** Proposed by Eysenck et al., (2007) explains how anxiety and stress impair attentional control, which may lead to cognitive failures.
ii. ***Resource Theory / Limited Capacity Theory:*** Proposed by Kahneman (1973) states that attention is a limited resource, fatigue and sleep loss reduce available cognitive resources, increasing errors.
iii. ***Executive Function Theory:*** Proposed by Miyake et al., (2000) links failures in working memory, inhibition, and cognitive flexibility to everyday cognitive lapses.

1.1 *Purpose*

The purpose of the present study was to examine whether perceived glass ceiling significantly predicts cognitive failure among first-generation female lawyers.

1.2 *Hypothesis*

H1: Perceived glass ceiling significantly predicts cognitive failure among first-generation female lawyers.

2. Method

2.1 *Research Design*

A quantitative, cross-sectional design was utilized to investigate whether perceived glass ceiling significantly predicts cognitive failure among first-generation female lawyers.

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2.2 *Sample*

This study sampled 70 first-generation female lawyers aged between 22-35 years, from different District Courts and High Courts across India. The sampling was done strictly on online mode via Google Forms, and the method of sampling was Snowball sampling technique because of the nature of the population being targeted for this study. All the participants were first generation female lawyers which can be interpreted as, there were no immediate family members of the participants in the law practice.

2.3 *Measures*

Cognitive Failures Questionnaire (Cfq-2): This scale has been developed by Goodhew & Edwards (2024) and is designed to measure cognitive failures in everyday life. This scale consists of 15 items. The scoring is done on a 5-point Likert Scale (1-5), in which 1 denotes Strongly Disagree and 5 denotes Strongly Agree. The total score ranges from 15 to 75. There is no reverse scoring in this scale, and all the items are summative, the scores of all the items must be added to obtain the total score. Test-retest reliability (r = 0.88)

Perceived Glass Ceiling: The Perceived Glass Ceiling Scale used in the present study was developed by the researcher based on an extensive review of the literature on gender-based barriers and the glass ceiling in professional settings (Loden, 1978; Morrison et al., 1987; Cotter et al., 2001). The scale consists of 7 items designed to assess perceived barriers to career advancement among first-generation female lawyers in India. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Total scores range from 7 to 35, with higher scores indicating greater perceived experiences of the glass ceiling. No items required reverse scoring, and the total score was obtained by summing the responses to all items. The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha (α) of .914 and McDonald's omega (ω) of .928. Construct validity was examined using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy was 0.849, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant, $\chi^2(21) = 423$, $p < .001$, indicating that the data were suitable for factor analysis. All seven items loaded satisfactorily on a single factor, with factor loadings ranging from .500 to .964, supporting the construct validity of the scale.

2.4 *Procedure*

The research work of this study started with a review of literature on the finalized variables, followed by selection of standardized tools for data collection for all of the variables. Hypothesis

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was formulated after the assumed outcomes were identified. The Participants were de-briefed about the purpose of this research study, and any doubt or question they had regarding this research was addressed. Data was collected after providing the participants with instructions. Before the completion of the questionnaire, informed consent was obtained from the participants.

Demographic information such as name, age, working hours, practice domain, registration body, priorities in life and experience in years were added in this study. Once the forms were filled, participants were thanked for their valuable time followed by the evaluation of collected raw data via standardized statistical analysis tools and followed by interpretation of results.

3. Analysis of Data

3.1 *Results*

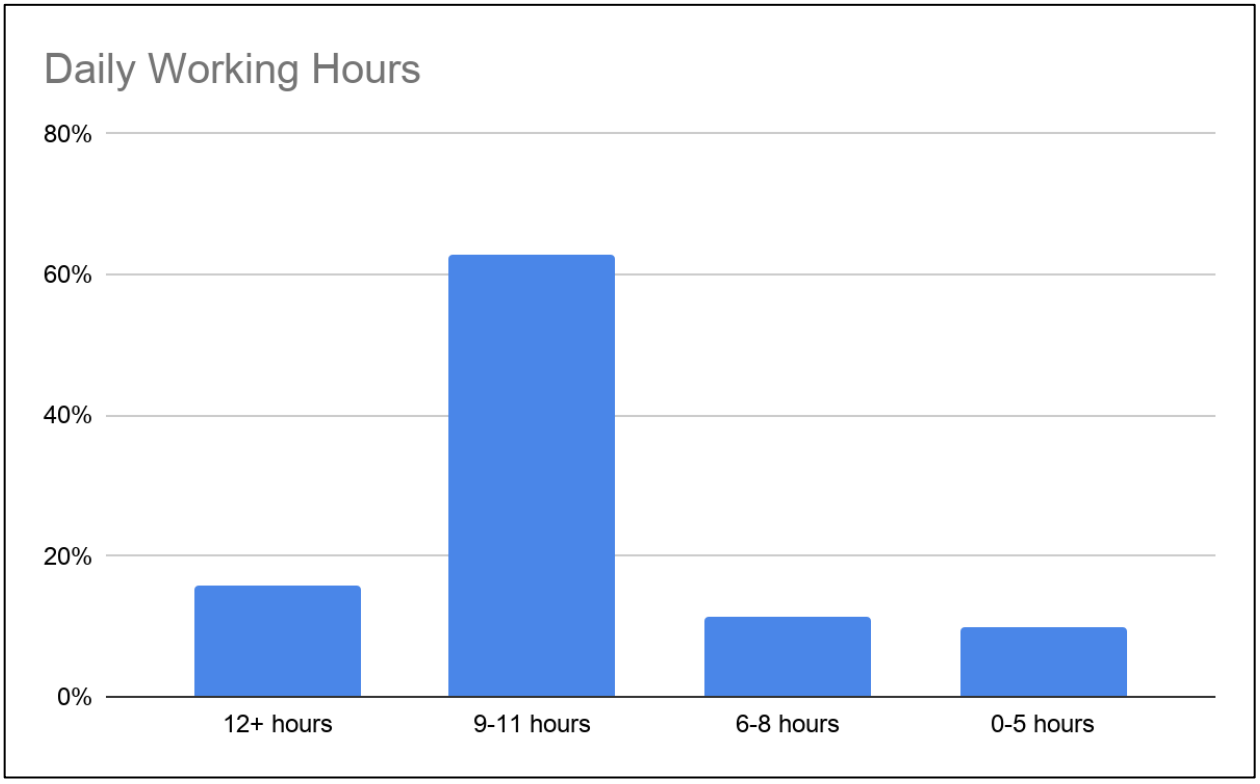

Figure 1: *Daily Working Hours*

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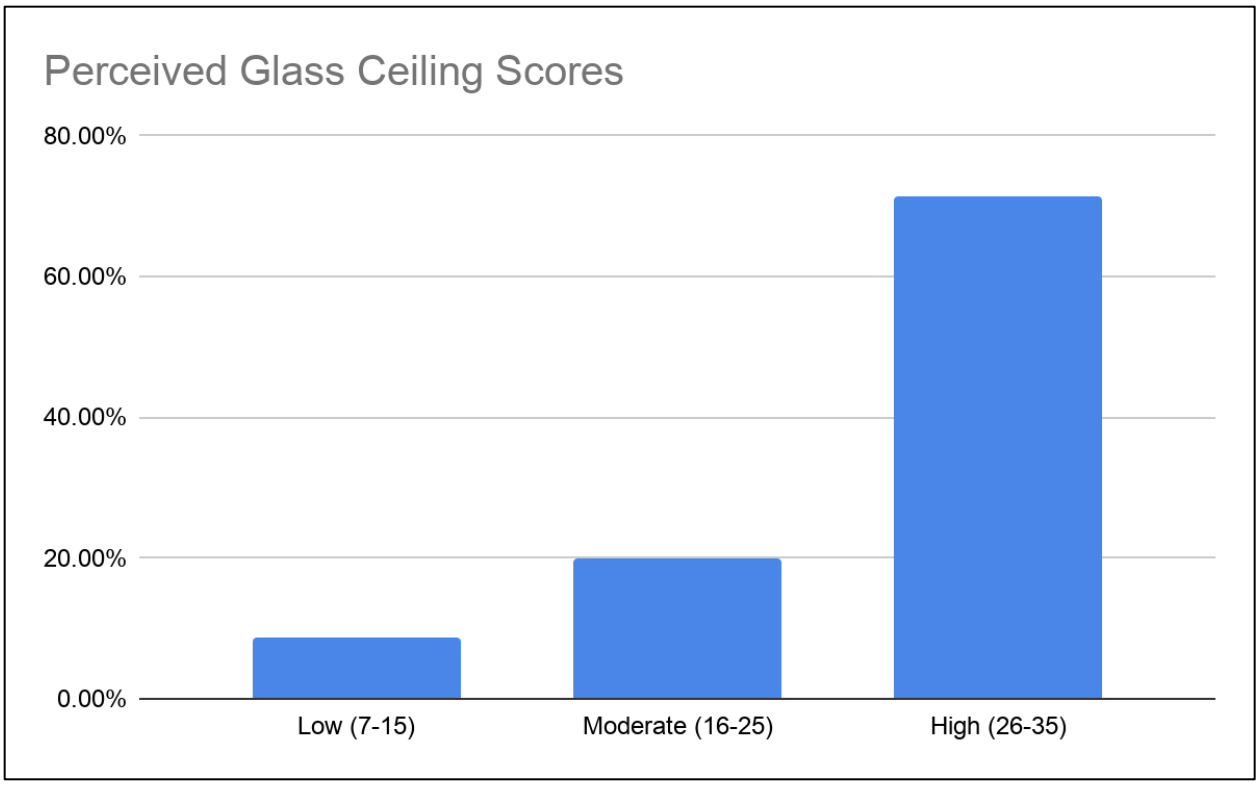

Figure 2: *Perceived Glass Ceiling Scores*

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics (Mean & Std. Deviation)*

	CF	PGC
Mean	52.9	27.7
SD	16.4	5.10

Table 2. *Regression Matrix*

Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Constant	17.43	10.10	1.73	0.089
Glass Ceiling	1.28	0.359	3.57	< 0.001

4. Discussion of Results

The results from Table 1 show that 16% of the participants reported working more than 12 hours a day on average, 63% reported working 9-12 hours, 11% reported 6-8 hours and 10% reported working 0-5 hours per day on average.

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The results from Table 2 show that 8.60% of the total participants reported their perception of glass ceiling to be LOW (7-15 points out of 35), 20% reported their perception of glass ceiling to be MODERATE (16-25 points out of 35), while 71.4% of the total participants reported their perception of glass ceiling to be HIGH (26-35).

The results from Table 3 show that the mean and standard deviation for Cognitive Failures is 52.9 and 16.4, whereas the mean and standard deviation for Perceived Glass Ceiling is 27.7 and 5.10, respectively.

Our findings from Table 4 indicate that when simple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine whether perceived glass ceiling predicts cognitive failure among first-generation female lawyers. The regression model indicated a positive relationship between perceived glass ceiling and cognitive failure ($R = 0.398$), explaining 15.8% of the variance in cognitive failure ($R^2 = 0.158$). Perceived glass ceiling emerged as a significant positive predictor of cognitive failure ($B = 1.28$, $SE = 0.359$, $t = 3.57$, $p < .01$). These findings indicate that higher levels of perceived glass ceiling are associated with higher levels of cognitive failures among first-generation female lawyers.

In simple words, female lawyers who perceived greater barriers to career advancement also reported experiencing more cognitive failures in their everyday professional and personal lives. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), persistent workplace barriers place a continuous psychological burden on individuals. When employees repeatedly perceive limited opportunities for growth, unequal recognition, or restricted career advancement despite their abilities, they may experience prolonged mental strain. Over time, this constant pressure can interfere with attention, concentration, and information processing, making every day cognitive slips such as forgetfulness, absent-mindedness, and attentional lapses more likely (Broadbent et al., 1982; Diamond, 2013).

The findings are specifically meaningful in the context of the legal profession in India where legal practice requires sustained concentration, precise decision-making, careful documentation, and the ability to manage multiple responsibilities and tasks simultaneously.

Similar observations have been reported by Krill et al. (2016), who suggested that legal professionals frequently experience demanding occupational conditions that may contribute to psychological strain.

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The cumulative effect of high occupational demands and perceived glass ceiling or prejudice may increase mental and physical fatigue, making cognitive lapses more frequent during demanding work hours (Karasek, 1979).

These findings are also consistent with the idea that workplace experiences influence not only career progression but also employees' psychological functioning. As a consequence, the likelihood of unintentional mistakes, forgetfulness and attentional lapses may increase. When individuals constantly devote cognitive and emotional resources to dealing with organizational inequalities, fewer resources remain available for everyday cognitive tasks. As a consequence, the likelihood of unintentional mistakes, forgetfulness, and attentional lapses may increase (Hobfoll, 1989).

Also, as the Two-factor theory of motivation by Herzberg (1959) states that salary and physical or environmental conditions of a job can only prevent dissatisfaction also known to be (dissatisfiers). Whereas the real factors responsible for satisfaction which are also known to be (satisfiers) include achievement, recognition and personal growth, which may often be hindered due to the prevalence of glass ceiling.

Another theory by Vygotsky (1978) which advocates for learning as a phase of three zones or layers, in which the innermost layer is the zone which includes what a learner can do unaided or without support, the outermost layer includes specific tasks that are too difficult for the learner and cannot be learned without guidance or scaffolding, term coined by Bruner (1978) which also means the need of the learner for one on one teaching or mentorship, and then the middle layer which is between what a learner can do without his/her own and what a learner cannot do without external support is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where the major learnings and skill acquisition takes place, including tasks that seem out of reach to the learner but are still achievable with scaffolding. In the situation of prejudice or glass ceiling, it may be hard for the learner to find the required mentorship to grow and learn.

5. Conclusion

H1: Perceived glass ceiling significantly predicts cognitive failure among first-generation female lawyers.

Hypothesis accepted, this can be interpreted as perceived glass ceiling significantly predicts cognitive failure among first-generation female lawyers. Higher perceptions of the glass

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ceiling were associated with higher levels of cognitive failures, indicating that career-related barriers may influence everyday cognitive functioning.

This investigation was aimed to study and understand whether perceived glass ceiling predicts cognitive failure among first-generation female lawyers in India. The sample was collected using the Snowball sampling technique and the total sample size comprised 70 first-generation female lawyers. The research findings support the presence of glass ceiling (perceived) and its significant influence on cognitive failures. Therefore, it is concluded that the experience of invisible barriers is not limited to career progression alone but also has meaningful psychological consequences reflected through everyday cognitive lapses.

The legal profession demands sustained attention, accurate decision-making, and continuous cognitive engagement (Broadbent et al., 1982). When female lawyers repeatedly encounter barriers to professional growth despite their competence and efforts, the psychological burden of these experiences may gradually influence their day-to-day cognitive functioning. Although the glass ceiling cannot always be observed directly, its effects may become noticeable through increased forgetfulness, attentional lapses, and cognitive slips experienced during periods of high work demand of the day.

So, whether it is a young lawyer staying back in the law chamber or office preparing cases late into the night, or waiting years for recognition despite consistently delivering quality work, or managing multiple case files under consistent pressure and deadlines, these invisible barriers surrounding career advancement are often accompanied by invisible psychological costs. The glass ceiling may not always prevent women from entering the profession, but it may quietly influence how they experience, perform, and sustain themselves within it. Recognizing, acknowledging and addressing these barriers is therefore not only essential for achieving gender equity but also for promoting healthier workplaces and advocating for the emotional well-being of women professionals.

The world is changing, and we are the face of the change.

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