



## Shattering the Myth of the “Glass Ceiling”

by Sally C. Pipes

### Summary

Women are said to be held back from positions of corporate leadership by a discriminatory “glass ceiling.” But factors other than discrimination account for lower numbers of female executives—factors that women are increasingly overcoming as more of them move up the corporate ladder.

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“Practically Alone at the Top: Only 14 Female Executives Dance on the U. S. Auto Industry’s Glass Ceiling,” blared a recent *USA Today* cover story that profiled the female executives of Ford, DaimlerChrysler, and General Motors.

These 14 women certainly represent a change from the early 1990s, when each company had only one or two female executives. But some critics complain that this still-small number is evidence of a discriminatory “glass ceiling” that keeps women from advancing to positions of corporate leadership.

Is there such a thing as a “glass ceiling”? The Big Three’s female executives do amount to a mere 7.1 percent of auto executives, lower than the 11.1 percent of female executives found in Fortune 500 companies as a whole. But this 7.1 percent must be compared to the percentage of women who are *qualified* for senior positions in the traditionally male-dominated auto industry. Such things as women’s chosen fields of study, educational attainment, and length of uninterrupted time in the labor force also must be taken into account.

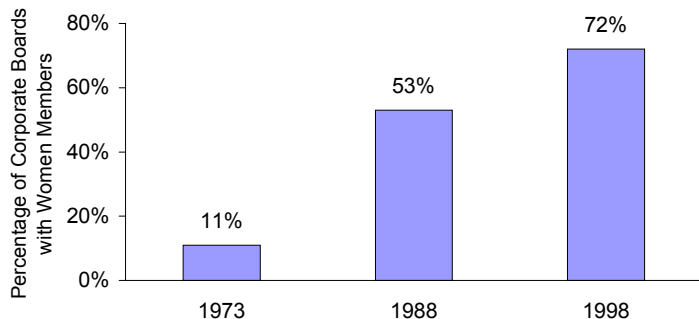
In the past, most women simply did not choose engineering as their field of study, a prerequisite for advancement in the auto industry. Hence, the qualified pool of women for climbing the auto industry executive ladder was small. Today, women are beginning to catch up, entering engineering and related fields in increasing numbers.

Length of time in the labor force is also a significant factor behind the small number of female auto executives. Many career women opt to drop out of the labor force to spend time raising children before returning, forgoing years of valuable experience. Interestingly, however, the majority of the 14 female auto

executives has not reached age 50, while most auto industry chief executives are in their 50s and 60s. As in other fields, age is less important than ability.

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### Number of Women in Corporate Leadership Continues to Grow



Source: *Women's Figures: An Illustrated Guide to the Economic Progress of Women in America, 1999*

The Big Three automakers need qualified engineers, manufacturing experts, designers, and marketing specialists if they are to remain competitive in the global marketplace. Not that long ago, the U. S. auto industry lost major market share to the Japanese, whose quality product better satisfied consumers' demands. To keep up, U. S. automakers know that they must hire the best, regardless of race or sex.

And being the best means meeting challenges. For executives in Detroit, days often start at 6:00 a.m. and end after an evening business dinner. Women get no special consideration. "Can you be a player at 40 hours a week?" asks Janet Klug, Ford's marketing manager. The answer, she says, is no, but women are up to the task.

Women should be encouraged to study engineering, science, technology, and other fields traditionally dominated by men. Experienced employees—male or female—could ensure the growth of the pool of qualified females by mentoring young women. Then, and only then, might we expect the number of female executives to increase in the auto industry, a tough and competitive business.

As General Motors vice president and Saturn Chairman Cynthia Trudell says, "I will skip meetings to tackle my protégés' serious concerns. A company is only as good as its people. My job, along with strategy and development, is to develop our future leaders."

Christine Cortez, vice president of DaimlerChrysler's fleet operations was asked whether, as a woman, she felt out of place. "If that bothered me," she responded, "I would have gotten out of this industry 20 years ago."

Charges of a "glass ceiling" in the workplace come not from successful women such as Klug, Trudell, and Cortez, but from professional political activists. Women who seek opportunities, run with them, and advance to executive positions are seeing their efforts rewarded while the activists, on the outside looking in, complain.

Carleton S. Fiorina, the newly appointed CEO of Hewlett-Packard, stated, "There is no need to focus on my gender in discussing the appointment." She told reporters, "I truly hope that we are at the point now where everyone has figured out that the accomplishments of women across the industry demonstrate that there is not a 'glass ceiling.'"

As a woman who entered the largely male-dominated economics profession some years ago, I fully agree. Success depends not on sex but on individual hard work, ambition, and adding value to the bottom line. Women will never be alone at the top if they cherish and strive for these goals.

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