The Glass Ceiling in the 21st Century: Understanding Barriers to Gender Equality
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In May 2010 the Alliance ran a highly successful conference entitled *Skating on the Glass Ceiling*. From among the many distinguished speakers, Professor Germain Greer gave a keynote address on the status of women and girls in the 21st Century. This book continues to explore the metaphor of the glass ceiling by bringing together a ‘group of experts to set the record straight and provide scientific insight into the real situation of women in organisations’ (Barreto, Ryan & Schmitt, 2009, p. 4).

*The Glass Ceiling in the 21st Century* is broken into four parts: gender equality developments in the workplace; responses to subtle barriers women face; gendered experience in the workplace; and solutions: advancing equality in the workplace. The chapters are fairly dense, with plenty of references and some overlap of content. However, they do present a broad picture of why ‘women have to work harder than men do to be perceived as equally competent’ (Cikara & Fiske, 2009, p. 85).

Chapter 2 investigates pervasive stereotypes about women and leadership; ‘both correlational and experimental studies demonstrate discriminatory disadvantages for women as leaders. This bias in favor of men extends even to more feminine settings such as nursing and social work, in which men also advance more quickly than women do’ (Eagly & Sczesny, 2009, p. 31). The disheartening conclusion from this chapter is that ‘there is little evidence of large changes in gender stereotypes’ (p. 33).

The topics of tokenism, sexual harassment, affirmative action and family-friendly policies are also examined in *The Glass Ceiling in the 21st Century*. While it is clear that overt sexism and discrimination have declined rapidly over the past 50 years, sexism has ‘taken on new forms that are a great deal more subtle and more difficult to capture than are older forms of sexism’ (Barreto, Ellemers, Cihangir & Stroebe, 2009, p. 102). Likewise; ‘subtle discrimination is also unlikely to be addressed – both because it does not appear illegitimate and because it does not elicit the type of emotion that leads to protest’ (p. 117). ‘For example, women are regularly recruited for upper-level positions that are associated with a high risk of failure, and female managers are stereotyped as either competent or warm – but not both’ (Barreto, Ryan & Schmitt, 2009, dust-jacket).

A chapter of particular interest examines the effects of gender stereotype threat. This is a disruptive mental state, or the experience of anxiety and concern, where an individual feel that ‘they might be judged in terms of negative stereotypes...[stereotype threat] can elicit a disruptive mental state that can degrade their performance in stereotype-relevant domains’ (Zhang, Schmader & Forbes, 2009, p. 131). For example, if girls about to take a maths test are primed about a negative stereotype - that females are no good at maths - then those girls will more than likely have a decreased performance in the test. Gender stereotype threat is particularly relevant to educators of girls. While single-sex schools are most adept at dispelling gender stereotypes, it is important for girls to understand and realise the effects of stereotype threat in the world outside their school walls. Stereotype threat is...
pervasive and powerful, it ‘creates a situational pressure that not only impairs performance but can directly affect the career aspirations of women’ (p. 131). Conversely, the presence of female leaders and explicit education about stereotype threat can reduce its negative consequences.

We have just celebrated 100 years of International Women’s Day. This text is a timely reminder to educators of girls that women ‘still face important obstacles to their career advancement and that – like glass – many of these are difficult to see’ (Barreto, Ryan & Schmitt, 2009, p. 17). Part of the responsibility of educating the girls in our schools is to make these barriers visible and prepare girls with strategies and tools to overcome each hurdle.