

Glass ceiling effect in Adam Shankman's *What Men Want* Movie (2019)

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Apr 20, 2022

Revised May 21, 2022

Accepted May 24, 2022

Keywords:

Career

Gender

Glass ceiling

Stereotyping

Women

ABSTRACT

The glass ceiling effect is a phenomenon that often happens in society but is still rarely addressed. It is because this phenomenon is oftentimes hard to notice since we are already used to it. However, this kind of issue is apparent in *What Men Want* (2019) movie. This current study aims to analyze the glass ceiling effect faced by the main character in the movie, Ali Davis. The method used to help analyze the data is a qualitative method by taking dialogues from the movie as the main data of this research. The result shows the aspects that indicate the glass ceiling effect in the movie are the employee promotion system, discrimination from male coworkers, and discrimination from a prospective client. Eventually, this study reveals that the glass ceiling effect continuously occurs in the modern era. Therefore, this current study suggests that companies have to be mindful when they set policies, and a good understanding of gender equality among people in the workplace is also needed to minimize the similar cases.



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1. INTRODUCTION

The glass ceiling effect is a phenomenon that is still often happening in our society to this day. This term was coined in 1978 by Marilyn Loden during her speech in a panel discussion about women's aspirations. She argued that the "invisible glass ceiling" was a cultural thing and not personal which affect and damage women's aspirations and career opportunities (Loden, 2017). The word "glass" points out the subtlety and transparency of the barrier; meanwhile, "ceiling" indicates the upper limitation for someone to rise to a higher position in the office or organization. The history of the glass ceiling derived from the past when women were still stuck in the domestic sphere. At that time, women were referred to as the secondary gender below men (Srivastava, 2019). As consequence, women were not allowed to work, have a proper education, or have any political opinions (World Mapper, 2019). Through the waves of feminism, women began to voice out their desire to oppose those images and achieve gender equality (Arat, 2015). After the feminism waves, women started to get higher education and actually performed better than men. However, it did not have a significant impact on the success of women's careers (Evers and Sieverding, 2014). In 1991, the U.S. Department of Labor recognized the glass ceiling term and defined it as "artificial barriers based on an attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization into management-level positions (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991). These barriers are mostly experienced by women and minorities in the workplace. Furthermore, several studies have proven that

experiences in the workplace are clearly gendered (Anjum and Muazzam, 2018; Erikson and Josefsson, 2019; Rief and Clinkinbeard, 2020; Snively, Romeo and Ciardiello, 2021). It implies that even though the glass ceiling phenomenon has been around for a long time, it is still as relatable as ever. Thus, it also inspires several movies where the female protagonist tries to break the glass ceiling phenomenon such as in *What Men Want* (2019).

What Men Want (2019) is an American romantic comedy movie. It is a gender reversal of the previous movie entitled *What Women Want* (2000). The plot is relatively similar to that of the main protagonist who can hear the inner thoughts of the opposite sex. In *What Men Want* (2019), the main protagonist is a career woman who has all the male stereotypes attached to her such as a workaholic, confident, and competitive. Her name is Ali Davis or often addressed as Ali throughout the movie. She works as an Atlanta sports agent at Summit Worldwide Management (SWM) where 90% of her co-workers are male. Despite her good performance at work, she still could not get a promotion. She then confronted her boss, Nick Ivers and he gave her some lame excuses. He argues that Ali does not connect well with men and was doing well on "her own lane". This scene reflects the glass ceiling effect in the movie because Ali's boss, who was a man, did not give her valid reasons why she did not get a promotion and he even told her to just stay still in her position. Ali is determined to prove she deserves promotion by trying to register upcoming basketball star, Jamal Barry. In the stressful situation, Ali was involved in an event that caused her to be able to hear men's inner thoughts. Later on, she intends to use her new ability to help her solve all of her problems at work so she could get a promotion. As expected, some secrets had been hidden from her all along. This movie perfectly depicts the struggle of women in a male-dominated workplace, namely the glass ceiling effect.

Although many literary works featured the glass ceiling effect as their theme, researches on it in movies are still very limited. A study by Lauren and Madeline (2016) analyzed the glass-ceiling problem in Disney's *Mulan* (1998) and *Princess and the Frog* (2009). They point out that the narratives of these non-white heroines stick to reality to a greater extent. Their stories contrast with white princesses who seem to have no limitations and most of them have a different fate from the beginning of the story. *Mulan* and *Tiana*'s stories end with them choosing to return to their initial state even though they have broken the barriers on their journey. *Mulan* decides to fulfill her traditional domestic duties after taking her father's place while *Tiana* dedicates her life to unglamorous work. It shows the racial hierarchy among Disney princesses. There are also other studies by Souha (2013; 2015) which analyzes the role of media in the depiction of career women and the glass ceiling effect. In both of her studies, she uses social role theory with a conceptual model of movies as a social text to analyze career women characters in more than 100 movies. Her studies reveal potentially negative stereotypes of career women such as bad personality, failure in intimacy, and inability to balance work and family. She noted that these negative depictions have a major impact on the glass ceiling effect and need to be addressed. Compared to previous research, this current study will only focus on and discuss in-depth on one movie, namely *What Men Want* (2019). Moreover, the storyline of this movie is very relevant to modern society. This topic deserves to be discussed because there are still many people who are not familiar with the term "glass ceiling" even though it is very apparent in various fields. The purpose of this current study is to reveal the glass ceiling effect faced by the main character, Ali Davis, in a male-dominated workplace. Thus, this research is expected to provide an understanding of the glass ceiling effect and provide an overview of the glass ceiling effect in the workplace.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This current study used qualitative as the research method. This method is considered suitable for the research because qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Consequently, this approach was used to analyze and describe the glass-ceiling phenomenon which occurred in *What Men Want* (2019) movie. This research focuses on the glass ceiling effect faced by the main character of the movie who happened to be a black woman, Ali Davis. The data were gathered by watching and re-watching the movies several times and note-taking the important scene related to the issue. It helped to get a better understanding and deeper meanings of the movie. Furthermore, supporting references were also needed to assist the analysis obtained. Supporting references were collected through secondary reading from journals, books, and websites related to the topic of discussion.

In order to complete this research, several steps had been undergone. The first step was to watch the movie several times to get a better understanding of events and the storyline. The second step was to re-watch the movie while note taking and highlight the events related to the aim of the study. This was intended to be able to narrow the scope of the analysis in accordance with the focus of this study i.e. glass ceiling effect. It should be noted that in this step, the researcher only focused on the problem faced by the main

character, Ali Davis. Most of the data would be in the form of dialogues in the movie. The next step was grouping the data collected from note taking. Additionally, reading the existing data through secondary reading of articles from journals and websites was also done during the process to support the data. Moreover, content analysis was used to analyze the data. According to Kothari (2004: 110), content analysis consists of analyzing the contents of documentary materials reviews such as books, magazines and the contents of all other verbal materials can be either spoken or printed. Thus, it was expected that this technique could explain both verbal and non-verbal actions in the movie that portrays the glass-ceiling phenomenon. Finally, the results of the analysis systematically arranged in this article along with the conclusion. All important steps are important to be able to analyze data optimally and accurately.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This study focuses on the phenomenon of the glass ceiling effect featured in *What Men Want* (2019) which tells the story in the workplace from the perspective of a black woman. The focus of this research is the main character of the movie, Ali Davis. At the beginning of the movie, we are introduced to Ali Davis as a black woman who is really passionate about her job. She was convinced that she would make a partner or got a promotion from all of her hard work. Unfortunately, she did not get it which made her furious because she thought it was so unfair to her. It was the moment that we could begin to clearly see the glass ceiling effect in the movie.

In this section, the analysis of the glass ceiling phenomenon is divided into 3 sub-chapters. These sub-chapters reveal the struggles that Ali faced as a black woman to get into a higher position in a male-dominated workplace. Some of the struggles that Ali has to encounter are the employee promotion system, discrimination from male coworkers, and discrimination from a prospective client.

3.1. The Employee Promotion System

In terms of gender equality, the system is the hardest thing to change. The patriarchal system is a very familiar term when it comes to issues related to gender. Patriarchy is a system of relations, beliefs, and values embedded in the political, social, and economic system that structure gender inequality between men and women (Nash, 2020). This concept gave the idea that men have greater power than women. Thus, this patriarchal system also caused women most likely to be in an inferior position in the workplace (Adisa, Cooke, and Iwowo, 2019).

As we have discussed earlier, the conflict in *What Men Want* (2019) movie arises because Ali did not manage to become a partner or be promoted. She felt she had done her best and was sure that she would get it this time, but she still failed. When Ali confronts her boss, we can see how the employee promotion system becomes one of the main reasons that she faced the glass ceiling effect.

Ali: Is this a joke, Nick? Huh? I mean, what do I have to do to make partner?

Nick: You know the deal. It has to be unanimous partner approval.

Ali: Okay. So, who was it? It was Kevin, wasn't it? I knew it was Kevin.

Nick: It's anonymous, so I honestly couldn't tell you.

In the conversation above, we can see that the partner selection system is carried out through a voting system that must be approved by everyone, without exception. The voting is done anonymously so that no one knows each other's choice. It may not be a concern if the proportion of men and women in the company is balanced. However, Ali works in a company where most of her coworkers are men. Therefore, this kind of system is not suitable as the basis of employee promotion for there is a chance the result will be biased. Ali could not know the certain reason why she did not become a partner. It is all because she did not know who voted her down to be a partner and what their reasons are. A transparent system is needed to minimize foul play to provide the same opportunity for men and women in the company. Therefore, intransparency of the voting system is the first factor that contributed to the glass ceiling effect phenomenon faced by Ali.

Moreover, Nick's next words also give us more insight about the systematical problem in the company.

Nick: Look, this is a meritocracy. So, you're not entitled to be a partner.

Meritocracy is a system that offers a social ladder for mobility. It is the idea that provides an opportunity for all people who have the 'talent' combined with the 'effort' to rise to a higher position regardless of their social status at birth (Littler, 2017). Therefore, basically, Nick explained that his company gives equal opportunity to everyone and Ali is just not good enough to be promoted. Hearing this, Ali got angry and listed all of her

achievements but Nick did not seem to care at all. It is as if he does not want to acknowledge Ali's arguments. It indicates the unconscious bias that men have more potential than women caused their achievements often be unrecognizable (Minor, 2020). Thus, the meritocracy is not really running in the company since Ali's achievements seem to have no value in Nick's opinion.

Their next conversation is also strengthening the portrayal of the glass ceiling effect when Nick encounters Ali's argument.

Nick: But you don't have any of the big three clients, do you? The MLB, the NBA, the NFL. I mean, Eddie signed Mitchell Trubisky. That's a number-one draft pick. Boom. Done.

Ali: Boom. Yeah.

Nick: Look, I'm gonna be honest with you. You don't connect well with men. That means you're doing great in your lane. So, let's just stay in your lane. Okay?

Ali: Okay. Are you finished?

Nick: yeah, I'm good

Ali: great. I have to go get back in my "female lane".

Nick's utterance shows the subtle meaning that Ali did not get a promotion because of her identity as a woman. He thinks Ali does not connect well with men. However, he does not explain what he meant by "connect with men". Nevertheless, we can assume most men in the company did not vote for Ali and that is the reason why she was not selected to be a partner. She lost the vote to her male coworker because he is favored by the majority of the male employees. Therefore, it may be said that the voting system is not only based on work performance but is also influenced by the preferences of employees. It is perhaps the reason why she tends to have a hard time getting promotions in the company.

Furthermore, Nick is also drawing a dividing line between men and women in the company by telling Ali to stay in her lane. He praises Ali's work but he basically disapproves Ali's desire from wanting to move up to a higher position. His statements oppose one another. It suggests that Nick admits that Ali has done a great job but Ali does not get a promotion because she is a woman and does not have a good relationship with male coworkers. Nick's explanation also contradicts his previous statement, which describes that there is no difference between men and women. It can be said that the company system is unclear. It is as if the company systems are only good at the concept. In practice, gender inequality and the patriarchal system are still strongly maintained and thus still become the main factor of the glass ceiling effect in the company.

Ali, disappointed and angry at what happened in her office, goes to see her father. Her father, Skip Davis, raised her as a single father. He owns a boxing gym and names his daughter after his favorite boxer, Muhammad Ali. It could be the case that Skip wanted his daughter to be strong and independent, as one study suggests that parents use names to play into gender norms (Hutson, 2016). In addition, at the end of the movie, she also admits that she wanted to be a boxer when she was a kid. From this narration, we can understand that Ali's character is shaped by her father. He taught her to be a tough and independent woman who dared to stand up for herself.

Ali tells him the problems she is having in the company while boxing to let out her emotions. Their conversation gives another mark on how bad the system at the company where Ali worked.

Ali: I work harder than all of 'em. I do my job better. And they're still trying to hold me down.

Skip Davis: They hit you, you hit back even harder. You got you. You hear me? You got you.

Ali: How am I supposed to fight a system that's rigged against me, Daddy, huh? Tell me that!

This saying of Ali also shows that she is aware that the problem she faced is mainly because of her company system. She is angry because she cannot do anything about it. She feels the system in her office is manipulated. With her condition of being a minority in a male-dominated workplace, it is very difficult for her to rise into a higher position. She knows that she has to work harder and better than most people do in the company and she did it. However, she still could not get the position she wanted. Her father cheered her daughter on and advised her to sign Jamal Bary, a number one draft NBA pick, to prove to her boss that she deserved to be a partner. It clearly marks the glass ceiling phenomenon because Ali has difficulty getting promoted not because of her performance but because of the artificial barriers in her company. Therefore, the unclear and intransparent system of employee promotion in the company is the main factor of the glass ceiling effect in the movie. With that kind of system, the possibility of the system being manipulated or biased against female workers is high. In Ali's case, the system prevents her to get into a higher position without definite reason, which indicates the glass ceiling effect in the movie.

3.2. Discrimination from Male Coworkers

In the workplace, discrimination against women is quite common. This can not be separated from the historical background of women as secondary gender. Women are most likely to experience gender discrimination when both token jobs and jobs where women were approaching men's majority status (Stainback, Ratliff, and Roscigno, 2011). In other words, women are prone to discrimination in a male-dominated workplace.

As the movie starts, we can immediately notice that Ali's coworkers are mostly men. As Ali enters the meeting room, she is greeted by a room filled with men. There are only 2 or 3 women in the room. Even when her boss, Nick Ivers, enters the room, he addresses everyone in the room with 'gentlemen'. He does not seem to acknowledge the existence of several women in that meeting room. It proves that the women in the company receive discrimination even by their own boss. Their presence is not recognized as if they are just an unimportant part of the company.

Before the meeting started, Kevin, one of her coworkers, is talking to Eddie. However, he holds the rest of his story when Ali sits next to him.

Kevin: Story gets better, I'll finish it later.

Eddie: Oh, come on, Ali can handle locker-room talk. Right, bro?

In this scene, Ali has faced discrimination with Eddie's words when he calls her "bro". Bro culture is a form of discrimination. It defines as an accepted culture of bias manifested in behaviors and decisions that support the exclusion of women in the organization, both socially and professionally (Weathersby, 2019). On top of that, he even said Ali could handle "locker-room talk". It is a term used to describe conversations that are usually talked about in private because it involves vulgar words or bragging about someone's sexual conquest. Eddie's behavior illustrates that he does not regard Ali as a woman. He thinks Ali will not mind a talk that might hurt a woman's feelings.

Ali, who was probably used to it, did not think much of it and she also mentioned about poker night. Ali actually has been suspicious of her male coworkers holding a poker night to discuss a strategy to get their target clients without her.

Ali: Yeah, I'm sure you'll get the X-rated version at poker night.

Kevin: Why do you keep on this? There's no poker night. If there was a poker night, we would invite you 'cause I'd like to take your money.

Ali: Really?

Eddie: No poker night. None. Nada. Zip!

We can see that Kevin denies Ali's accusations immediately. Eddie also insists that there is no poker night. However, when Ali gains the ability to read men's inner thoughts, Ali finds out that her intuition is right. She knows about all of that when she asked Kevin.

Ali: Kevin, my man. Do we have any meetings on the books for Joe Dolla and Jamal yet?

Kevin: Nothing yet, but we are working on it.

Kevin's inner thought: *"Just poker at Nick's house tonight and you're not invited."*

This scene illustrates another discrimination that Ali received. She is not notified or invited to poker night at Nick's house. Ali who heard Kevin's inner thoughts casually comes to Nick's place without telling them. As it turned out, the room is filled with men including their target client, Joe Dolla. It was one of their strategies to be able to have a connection with Joe Dolla so he would choose their company as an agent for his son, Jamal Barry. Ali's ability to hear men's inner thoughts helps her to beat all of her coworkers in the game. However, she chooses to let Joe Dolla wins the game so he will be pleased. Therefore, with her ability, Ali could break the glass ceiling effect that has been holding her back for so long. Although she had previously suspected that the men in her company often had poker nights, she does not know that for sure. All this time, she was put aside. She does not get the same opportunities or treatment as her male coworkers. Her male coworkers have a bigger chance to get a client than she does. It might be also one of the reasons of her inability to get the three big clients targeted by her company.

Not only did Ali get discrimination from her male coworkers, but also from her own boss. When one of the employees, Ethan, betrayed the company and seized the opportunity to become a freelance agent with only a 5% commission, Nick blamed Ali for giving him the idea during the last meeting.

Ali: Okay, this is not all my fault.

Nick: I mean if I didn't think I'd get crucified by all those MeToo-ers, I'd fire your ass today.

Ali: Oh, so you're saying you're not firing me because I'm a woman.

Nick: No. Not just that.

Ali: Oh. So, you're not firing me because I'm a black woman.

Nick: No. No, no. I didn't say that. Because that'd be racist and sexist.

From the excerpt above, we can see that Ethan has a desire to fire Ali. However, he was afraid because of the MeToo movements. The MeToo movement is a social media campaign that uses the hashtag (#) MeToo which facilitates victims of sexual assault and harassment, particularly by women of color in low-income communities (Murphy, 2019). This movement intends to encourage survivors to speak up about their experiences and struggles thus it will form a sense of solidarity between them. Nick fears that his career and reputation will be ruined if he fires Ali. When Ali confirms that the reason Nick did not fire her is because she is a woman, Nick says no, but goes on to say "Not just that". It means that he confirms that it is true he does not fire Ali because she is a woman. Then, Ali asks again by emphasizing the word "black woman". Nick denies it by saying it will sound racist and sexist. Even though he says so, his behavior and utterances showed the opposite. He does not want to be seen as racist and sexist but in reality, that is what he did to Ali all this time.

Hence, it is evident that Ali experienced discrimination from her coworkers. She is excluded from the group and not given the same opportunities as her male coworkers that contributed to the reason of Ali's limited chance to be promoted.

3.3. Discrimination from Prospective Client

Clients have an important role in the business world. This is because apart from relying on good relationships between coworkers, good relationships with clients also affect productivity in business. It eventually plays a part in the glass ceiling effect because clients most likely have homophily preferences. Homophily preferences is a tendency to have a connection with people who share the same similar characteristics or preferences (Lobel and Sadler, 2016). Perception of homophily preferences often serves to perpetuate inequality along gendered lines (Purcell, MacArthur, and Samblanet, 2010). Since the proportion of males is higher, homophily preferences would perpetuate discrimination against women (Espinosa and Ferreira, 2022).

In the movie, Ali is determined to make Jamal Barry, the NBA's number one draft pick, one of her clients. However, she has to deal with his manager and father, Joe Dolla Barry. He is the one who takes care of and decides all things related to Jamal. His bossy and arrogant attitudes makes him a bit difficult to deal with. According to homophily preferences, as a man, Joe Dolla's preferences in business most likely are also male. This can be seen clearly seen in the snippet of his conversation with Ali after the meeting.

Joe Dolla: You know what? To be honest, I never considered a female agent until now.

Joe Dolla said that because he was impressed with Ali's performance at the meeting, Ali reads his and Jamal's thoughts during the meeting so they will consider joining their company. From Joe Dolla's words, we can see that he did not even consider a female agent at first. Therefore, it can be said that he prefers working with men. He seems to have negative views about working with women. However, he began to acknowledge Ali's performance at work.

The positive response from Joe Dolla gave Ali a new spirit. She felt that her goal would soon be achieved, so she continued her approach by taking Joe and Jamal to watch the Hawks game from the sky suite. Even though Jamal is eager to accept Ali's invitation, his father rejects it by saying that it is family time and he tells Ali that she would not understand it because she is not a family woman.

Ali: What makes you think I'm not a family woman?

Joe Dolla: Ooh, ooh. No disrespect. I mean, you doing you. But this is a different set of values right here. You know, we all about the roots. So this is about the roots, it's deep.

Joe Dolla's inner thought: *"I don't trust a woman with no family. Like I don't trust a man with no eyebrows and too many keys"*

From the conversation above, we can see that Joe Dolla is the type of person who holds the traditional belief that family is everything. He guesses that Ali is not a family woman and he has no problem with that. However, it is different when Ali read his mind. Joe Dolla does not believe in a woman with no family and compares her to a man who frequently tells lies. Indeed, our social conditions largely support heterosexual

marriage and family life as a goal of a successful life and those who fail to fit this category are often marginalized and subject to stereotyping, discrimination, or stigmatization (Budgeon, 2016). Thus, in some cultures, women who are still single or unmarried at a certain age are often viewed as bad. They are considered to have many problems that make them unable to find a partner. In short, Joe Dolla distrusts Ali because he thinks Ali is a troubled woman. Therefore, to build Joe Dolla's trust, Ali lied by claiming that she was married and would take her family too. She takes advantage of the situation when Will, a bartender, and her one-night stand partner, comes to her office to apologize and clear up the misunderstanding between them. Eventually, Joe Dolla agreed to come to watch the game.

We can notice that a client's preferences can affect the glass ceiling effect. If Ali did not know what Joe Dolla was thinking, she would not be able to handle him, which could result in her failing to get Jamal as her client. If that happens, she cannot prove that she deserves to be promoted and consequently stuck in the same position. Therefore, client preference plays an important role in Ali's work and could be a factor in her not being able to be promoted.

4. CONCLUSION

What Men Want (2019) is a movie about the struggle of a black woman, Ali Davis, to get into a higher position in the male-dominated workplace. Her belief that women have an equal opportunity as men to get a higher position is shattered because she faced a glass ceiling phenomenon in her company. The employee promotion system, discrimination from male coworkers, and discrimination from prospective clients are some of the factors that contribute to her struggles. She could not get a higher position for a long time and was stuck in the same position. Consequently, this current research reveals that the glass ceiling effect still present in modern times, especially for women who work in male-dominated workplaces. While their struggles may sound trivial and often subtle, these events have had a profound impact on women's careers. This current study suggests that company policy must be based on gender equality so that all employees have equal opportunities in the company and thus minimize cases of the glass ceiling effect. Moreover, other researchers are also encouraged to conduct more research on literary works that exclusively discuss the phenomenon of the glass ceiling effect so that this social problem can be recognized to provide awareness to the younger generation.

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