

Breaking through the glass ceiling: meritocracy steps for women's civil service careers

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Abstract

This study investigates the challenges posed by the glass ceiling and the implementation of meritocracy for female civil servants (in Palu City, aiming to identify strategies for enhancing career progression. Employing a constructivist research paradigm with a qualitative approach, data were gathered through interviews including the Mayor, City Secretary, BKPSDMD Head, and representatives from various departments within the Palu City Government. Analysis was conducted using triangulation techniques aided by NVIVO 14 software. Findings reveal that the glass ceiling manifests as conflicts in work-life balance, limited decision-making authority, and entrenched gender biases, hindering women's career advancements. Nonetheless, it also serves as motivation for female civil servants to assertively engage in career development. Overcoming these obstacles demands exceptional resilience, perseverance, and a composed demeanor in facing challenges. The glass ceiling can stimulate proactive measures toward career success among women. Conversely, a fair and transparent meritocracy system emerges as a viable solution to mitigate the glass ceiling's effects. This entails implementing mentoring, coaching, training, and educational initiatives addressing women-specific workplace challenges such as time management, salary negotiations, and work-life equilibrium.

Keywords: *glass ceiling, meritocracy, women's careers, gender stereotypes.*

Introduction

Patriarchal society in Indonesia still views women as wives, mothers, and people who have reproductive responsibilities, not as capable leaders (McLaren et al., 2023). This is similar to other Asian countries where patriarchy is deeply rooted in the family, social, and government systems so that women's career opportunities are largely determined by men (Nguyen & McLaren, 2020). As an autonomous region, Palu City, which is the capital of Central Sulawesi Province, has the authority to carry out regional autonomy. According to a report from BKPSDMD Palu City, in 2023, the number of civil servants will be 5.443 people, the majority of whom will be women (68%). Apart from that, there are only seven female civil servants who hold the position of Head of Service from the 32 Regional Apparatus Organizations of Palu City, while men lead the others.

This phenomenon is certainly a challenge for the regional government of Palu City to pay attention to the representation of women in organizational leadership positions. This will certainly be an obstacle to improving the career path of female civil servants in the Palu City environment.

A person's career journey is often guided by two conflicting but side-by-side concepts, such as the glass ceiling and meritocracy. These two challenges are the subject of discussion, which not only reflects the complex realities of organizational dynamics but also highlights the challenges and aspirations of individuals who struggle to reach the top of their careers, especially women. For years, women and minorities have often found it difficult to break through the glass ceiling in the workplace.

On the other hand, the concept of meritocracy offers hope for a fairer stage in career development. Meritocracy is about rewards and promotions based on individual achievements, competencies, and contributions, not on external factors such as gender or race. However, the implementation of meritocracy in practice is often far from ideal. Sometimes, the principles of meritocracy are hampered by unconscious bias and discrimination. In many cases, the glass ceiling and meritocracy are interconnected (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010). The glass ceiling limits individual access to fairness in terms of meritocracy, while the lack of meritocracy principles can strengthen and maintain the glass ceiling. In other words, when the glass ceiling hinders someone's career progress, the principle of meritocracy is reduced because promotions and awards are no longer based on actual achievements and competencies.

These various gaps lead to invisible obstacles that prevent female civil servants from reaching top positions in careers or organizations (Krissetyanti, 2018). A phenomenon like this can lead to the glass ceiling phenomenon, which shows the lack of representation of women in top positions in women's career development (McLaren et al., 2023). The glass ceiling reflects the inequality in opportunity and recognition that still occurs in the world of work despite the social and legal changes that have occurred in recent decades (Prajuli et al., 2021).

In general, women in Indonesia who work in the public sector (including in government organizations) who want to advance in their careers need to manage the double burden of productive and reproductive life (Sunaryo et al., 2021). In addition, the growing literature also reveals the reason that women must obtain permission from their husbands and extended family by adopting male leadership traits to gain support from colleagues and recruiting housemaids in order to achieve success (Cho et al., 2016; Coley et al., 2023; McLaren et al., 2023).

A more inclusive and just work environment in the Palu City government requires comprehensive steps from organizations and individuals. In addition, the government must ensure that policies and procedures that support merit system-based promotions are consistent. Thus, the glass ceiling and meritocracy can coexist in practice. With a strong commitment from organizations and individuals to overcome the challenges associated with the glass ceiling and promote the principle of meritocracy, it is hoped that we can build a work environment that is more fair, inclusive, and just for all individuals,

regardless of their particular background.

The term glass ceiling refers to systemic gender inequality in public spaces, which stems from stereotypes and prejudice against women in positions of authority (Naguib & Madeeha, 2023). Acker (1992) was a pioneer in this approach, viewing organizations as "gender bearers" who use hegemonic power processes and complex practices to perpetuate gender inequality (Acker, 2006). Connell (2006) proposed four models for analyzing gender regimes in organizations, which include dimensions related to the gendered division of labor, power structures, emotions, and gender relations, as well as cultural and symbolic associations with gender. The goal is to make the invisible visible by uncovering hidden factors and mechanisms that perpetuate inequality (Acker, 1992, 2006; Connell, 2006).

Apart from the glass ceiling problem, the problem of determining structural positions, especially in the Palu City government, still needs to be based on a meritocracy system. Meritocracy is widely understood as a social system in which a person's ability, hard work, and personal achievements or abilities lead to wealth, employment, and power; in contrast, in non-meritocratic social systems, wealth and power are distributed based on a person's family, wealth, or social background (Suzuki & Hur, 2022). Meritocracy in the Palu City government, which has yet to be fully implemented, has resulted in new inequalities due to differences in abilities that arise due to differences in conditions experienced by each individual in the world of work.

Meritocracy has also been considered one of the core principles of modern civil service systems in many parts of the world (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010; Suzuki & Hur, 2022). Scholarly discussions often center on the topic of personnel decisions regarding civil servants, such as recruitment, promotion, and dismissal based on merit, not based on the will of political actors (Charron et al., 2017). A meritocratic system demands objectivity in selecting and giving awards to individuals based on individual achievements and hard work, not based on political connections (Suzuki & Hur, 2022).

The implementation of the merit system (meritocracy) in Indonesia should refer to Law Number 5 of 2014 concerning State Civil Apparatus to optimize bureaucratic services. Apart from that, the implementation of the merit system in Indonesia in the management of state civil servants is in Government Regulation Number 17 of 2020 concerning amendments to Government Regulation Number 11 of 2017 concerning civil servant management, which emphasizes the criteria and procedures for assessing the extent to which government agencies have implemented the merit system in civil servant management. The goal of development, especially in the field of Human Resources, is to create civil servants who are professional, have high performance, have integrity, and uphold neutrality. Meritocracy in these two regulations is interpreted as policy and management of civil servants based on qualifications, competencies, and performance fairly and reasonably without distinguishing between political background, race, skin color, religion, origin, gender, marital status, age, and disability. Thus, meritocracy should be carried out based on equal opportunities for each individual. This refers to concrete steps from leaders to commit to any structural changes

The demands of the domestic sphere are always attached to women,

which causes women not to be as flexible as men in pursuing careers in the public sphere (Charron et al., 2017). This means that there are unequal conditions in society, so it is necessary to consider implementing meritocracy without ignoring these conditions. The implementation of meritocracy needs to take into account efforts to reduce inequality through emphasizing favoritism towards disadvantaged groups or marginalized groups who have unequal initial conditions both in terms of education and economic ability (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010).

The glass ceiling phenomenon can be a manifestation of various gender discrimination, stereotypes, or inadequate organizational structures (Dowling, 2017). Meanwhile, the principle of meritocracy, which is the basis of a reward and promotion system based on achievement and competency without regard to gender or other non-performance factors, is considered one way to overcome the glass ceiling (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010). The Palu City Government has committed to encouraging gender equality and increasing women's participation in the bureaucracy. However, the extent to which these policies and practices have succeeded in overcoming the glass ceiling and implementing the principle of meritocracy in the Palu City Government still requires in-depth review. Qualitative research on glass ceilings and meritocracy in improving the career paths of female civil servants in the Palu City government environment is important because there is a need to understand in more depth the experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by female civil servants in the Palu City government environment.

Several previous studies such as from Baroun (2022), McLaren et al. (2023), Mulya and Sakhiyya (2021), Ng and McGowan (2023), Sunaryo et al. (2021) have addressed the topic of glass ceilings and meritocracy. However, this research will place more emphasis on subjective and contextual experiences that enable the identification of strategies more appropriate to the local context to provide practical solutions such as focused mentoring, training, and education. On the specific challenges women face in the workplace. Moreover, qualitative research was chosen because it focuses on detailed explanations of natural phenomena and presents them based on data found directly in the field (Lapan et al., 2012). This research will describe the phenomenon as accurately as possible based on information collected directly and present it as a narrative or description. This is intended to reinforce understanding related to science in the social field as an organized analysis of socially meaningful actions through direct observation (Neuman, 2014). Thus, qualitative research regarding glass ceilings and meritocracy in improving the career path of female civil servants in the Palu City Government is essential because of the need for a deeper understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced.

Methods

The research method used in this research is descriptive qualitative, aiming to understand the phenomenon of the glass ceiling and meritocracy in improving the careers of female civil servants in Palu City. This approach was chosen because it emphasizes a detailed explanation of the phenomena experienced by presenting them based on data found directly in the field. This

research also adopts a constructivist approach, which prioritizes understanding science in the social field through direct observation (Lapan et al., 2012; Neuman, 2014).

The research was carried out at the Palu City Regional Government during the period November 2023 to February 2024. The data collection method was through in-depth interviews. Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique with five informants who were directly involved in the problem under study. Data were gathered through interviews with the Mayor, Secretary, BKPSDMD Head, and representatives from various departments within the Palu City Government. Data analysis was carried out with the help of NVivo 14 software, using coding and content analysis (King, 2004). To ensure data validity, researchers conducted data triangulation (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). The results of data analysis are presented narratively and used to conclude the glass ceiling phenomenon and meritocracy in Palu City. Thus, the research method used provides a solid foundation for understanding and digging deeper into the career challenges faced by female civil servants in this context. Data were analyzed using NVivo 14 software to assist the coding and content analysis process. Interview transcripts were imported and grouped, then uniquely coded for each question and answer—open and axial coding identified and grouped main themes according to contextual, processual, and specific categories (King, 2004). Data validity is increased by comparing information from various sources and using the Miles & Huberman (1994) data analysis model, including data collection, reduction, presentation, and conclusion. In this research, the data-checking technique used by researchers is data or source triangulation to obtain data from different sources using the same technique, to compare and re-check the truth of the information obtained from different sources.

Result and Discussions

In this research, five informants were involved in obtaining information that supports research in analyzing what factors hinder the efforts of female civil servants in improving their career paths in the Palu City Government bureaucracy. Several keywords emerged, and "meritocracy" is the most important key in efforts to prevent the glass ceiling phenomenon (Table 1).

Table 1. Themes and Significant Statements of The Informants.

Themes	Mayor	Secretary	Head of BKPSDMD
Meritocracy	<i>"Implementing a meritocratic system ensures fair competition based on achievement and competence."</i>	<i>"Merit-based assessments are crucial in reducing gender biases in promotions."</i>	<i>"Meritocracy helps in recognizing and rewarding actual performance, thus creating equal opportunities for all."</i>
Obstacles (Glass Ceiling)	<i>"Women often face indirect resistance in leadership roles, which limits their career growth."</i>	<i>"Cultural stereotypes and biases are significant barriers that need to be addressed."</i>	<i>"Structural barriers within the organization make it harder for women to advance to higher positions."</i>
Opportunities (Motivation)	<i>"Despite the obstacles, many women are motivated to prove their capabilities and excel."</i>	<i>"Challenges can become opportunities for women to demonstrate resilience and leadership."</i>	<i>"The glass ceiling, while a barrier, also pushes women to work harder and aim higher."</i>

However, several keywords also indicate that the glass ceiling is not only an "obstacle" but can be an "opportunity" to "motivate" female civil servants in Palu City. The opportunity in question refers to the opportunities or prospects open to individuals or organizations in achieving goals or career advancement. In a glass ceiling context, opportunities can include opportunities for promotion or opportunities for skill development. Additionally, motivation can come from the desire to overcome obstacles and achieve success despite challenges. Individuals can be motivated by the urge to prove their abilities, fight for equality, or achieve career dreams.

The findings show that the existence of the glass ceiling is not visible because it is one of the problems in the phenomenon that will be explored. Nevertheless, the importance of the glass ceiling phenomenon must be anticipated because it can hinder the careers of female civil servants in Palu City. Barriers in the context of the glass ceiling refer to obstacles or barriers that hinder the career advancement of civil servants in the Palu City government, especially women, in achieving high or important positions in the organization. These barriers can be structural or cultural, such as gender or racial bias, lack of access to training or mentors, or organizational policies that do not support diversity and inclusion.

Motivation in the context of the glass ceiling can be an encouragement for individuals to persist and strive for success even though they face obstacles in achieving the desired career positions. This motivation can come from various sources, such as the desire to prove one's abilities, personal aspirations to achieve success, family responsibilities, or the urge to pave the way for future generations. This is due to individual motivation in facing the glass ceiling and how this motivation influences behavior and decisions in the work environment.

Opportunities in the context of the glass ceiling refer to the opportunities available to individuals to improve the careers of female civil servants in achieving leadership positions in organizations. Even though the glass ceiling can hinder the career advancement of female civil servants, opportunities for individuals to strive for success are still open. The opportunities in question include access to self-development programs, mentorship, and a supportive professional network.

Meritocracy is also the most dominant keyword and is considered to be a solution to overcome the glass ceiling obstacle. Even though meritocracy promises fairer strategic positions or positions, its implementation could be better. The principles of meritocracy are sometimes hampered by unconscious bias and discrimination. In the context of this research, the glass ceiling and meritocracy are interconnected because the glass ceiling can limit access to female civil servants. In contrast, the lack of meritocracy principles can strengthen and maintain the glass ceiling phenomenon.

The meritocracy system is expected to create a work environment that motivates and empowers individuals to achieve success in their careers, especially in overcoming the glass ceiling phenomenon. This is done to ensure that promotion and reward decisions are based on actual performance and competency, not on unfair preferences or biases. Thus, the meritocracy system can become a strong foundation for building inclusive, high-performing, and achievement-oriented organizations.

Analysis of the research findings shows how important it is to understand the concept of the glass ceiling and how this affects women's career advancement. Glass ceiling refers to invisible barriers that prevent women from reaching the highest leadership positions in organizations (Sunaryo et al., 2021; Taparia & Lenka, 2022). Despite the importance of gender in the lives of working women, progress in removing barriers that hinder women's advancement in organizations is clear (Caceres-Rodriguez, 2013). The hegemony of masculinity values that are so inherent in women causes men to be conditioned or identified as leaders. Women tend to be reluctant to advance their careers to a higher level.

Research findings show that the obstacles to the glass ceiling phenomenon are stereotypes that can create obstacles for women in achieving positions of authority or high managerial positions. Additionally, authority can fuel conflict in the workplace, especially if individuals feel that they are not recognized or given equal opportunities based on their qualifications or achievements but are influenced by gender stereotypes. Understanding and overcoming gender stereotypes and managing conflicts that may arise as a result are important in building a good work environment. Therefore, to facilitate a balance between professional life and personal life, it is important for Indonesian culture to change the paradigm that places women exclusively in domestic roles and to provide greater space for women to develop their careers without having to sacrifice their roles in the family. One argument that can be used in maintaining the status quo is that the reason why so few women reach the highest levels is reflected in government leadership positions in the City of Palu.

Belief in a meritocracy system early in their careers causes many women to imitate the behavior and characteristics of men with the assumption that they will then be judged based on merit. On the other hand, many female civil servants are aware that adaptation shows a lack of structural meritocracy, as well as favoritism towards the dominant group (men). This shows how many people feel this challenges their integrity and core values and choose to accept the consequences (Sealy, 2010). The findings of this study also align with Ng and McGowan (2023) findings that there are many different reasons to believe that women have weaker career opportunities than men. Some of this is related to the idea of the glass ceiling being a problem for women.

Based on these findings, it is known that the results support the research of Mulya and Sakhiyya (2021) and Sunaryo et al. (2021), which revealed that glass ceilings are a common phenomenon in many regional governments. This is shown by the lack of women occupying upper-echelon positions in government, resulting in gender inequality in the bureaucratic workforce (Krissetyanti, 2018). Therefore, female civil servants who feel that there is a glass ceiling in the workplace think that the organization does not treat them fairly.

Women often have additional responsibilities in terms of providing emotional and family support. This often causes conflict between professional responsibilities and their role in the family. In fact, with the right support from your partner, both can be carried out simultaneously. These findings show that the glass ceiling is a phenomenon whose impact (both positive and negative)

can be different for each person, depending on how women position themselves in terms of work or family, or even both. The balance that must be maintained if you choose both will be a challenge and an opportunity if you can convert the activities both internally and externally so that you can change the views that limit women's roles in domestic roles.

Table 2 shows that internal aspects include the choice to accompany children and partners, conflicts between professional life and roles in the family, as well as adaptation to the meritocracy system and external aspects involving government support programs for work-family roles, the meritocracy system in government, and culture. The patriarchy that influences perceptions of gender roles in society shows employees' experiences and career opportunities, as well as illustrates the challenges and efforts in overcoming glass ceiling obstacles.

Table 2. Comparison between internal and external aspects that influence the careers of female civil servants.

Internal Aspects	External Aspects
Have opportunities in a career but prefer to accompany children and partner	Program from the government as a form of support for work-family roles
There is a conflict between professional life and roles in the family	Meritocracy system in appointments and responsibilities in government
Partner support is important for improving career and well-being	The patriarchal culture assumes men lead, and women are expected to play domestic roles
Awareness of glass ceiling obstacles can motivate one to increase competence	Gender stereotypes as an obstacle to achieving a position of authority
Women often show resilience and perseverance in the face of obstacles	Lack of deep understanding of the glass ceiling and meritocracy
Adaptation to the meritocracy system but then realizing the lack of structural meritocracy	Challenges in overcoming the glass ceiling in many institutions
Rewards and promotions based on individual achievements, competencies, and contributions as a solution to overcome the glass ceiling	Government efforts to support gender equality and diversity

Even though the merit system is applied in promotions to structural positions in the bureaucracy, in practice, these promotions are still dominated by male candidates in the upper echelons. This raises a perception of organizational justice among female civil servants in the workplace. Therefore, when employees feel they are treated fairly by the organization, they have confidence in their career prospects within the organization. In addition, fair treatment encourages employee work engagement and increases organizational commitment.

Based on conflict theory MacDonald (2009), there are conflicting interests between different groups in organizations, including between genders. For example, the dynamics of power, control, and distribution of resources in the workplace influence women's career advancement. The glass ceiling creates tension between women and men in the workplace. Unequal access to high authority or managerial positions can lead to conflict between genders, especially if women feel that they need to be recognized or given equal

opportunities. According to conflict theory, the meritocracy system is implemented fairly and transparently; this can reduce conflict and dissatisfaction among employees Solt et al. (2016), including among female civil servants who may not feel recognized or appreciated. However, if the meritocracy system is implemented poorly and there is still bias or discrimination, this can strengthen conflict in the workplace.

Table 3. Strategic Efforts That Have Been Undertaken and Policy Suggestions.

Category	Efforts that have been made	Existing Policies	Next Attempt	Policy Advice
Collaboration	Share knowledge, experience, and resources with colleagues to expand your professional network.	a). Collaboration in teams and projects to increase women's involvement. b). Supports the formation of dedicated professional networks.	Increase cross-departmental collaboration to strengthen support for women in achieving leadership positions.	Encourage the establishment of mentorship programs for women in government.
Social Roles	Encourage women to actively contribute to the work environment to achieve higher leadership positions.	a). Pay attention to women's representation in strategic committees and important meetings. b). Holding forums or discussions that facilitate women to share experiences and views.	Establish a leadership training program specifically for women.	Expand mentoring programs to help women develop leadership skills.
Self-development	Enhance individual skills and capacity through participation in training and professional development programs.	a). Provide all civil servants with access to relevant training and professional development. b). Providing financial or time support for civil servants who wish to take courses or self-development programs.	Facilitate women's access to training and courses that help develop managerial skills.	Identifies specific development needs for women and offers tailored programs.
Social Support	Provide support and recognition in the work environment to	a). Create a supportive organizational culture,	Establish formal social support programs,	Encourage women's active participation in organizational

Category	Efforts that have been made	Existing Policies	Next Attempt	Policy Advice
Balance	women to increase their self-confidence.	recognizing women's contributions and achievements. b). Hold special events or awards to recognize the achievements of women in the organization.	such as discussion groups or employee counseling.	and community activities to expand their support network.
	Facilitate balance between work and personal life through flexible work schedule arrangements and employee welfare programs.	a). Provide flexible working hours or remote work to accommodate women's needs and balance career and personal life. b). Offers an employee wellness program that includes mental and physical health support.	Evaluate existing work flexibility policies and expand them as necessary.	Mengembangkan Develop more specialized and comprehensive welfare support programs for women, including child and elderly care services.
	Providing recognition and appreciation for the achievements and contributions of women in the organization.	a). Conduct an objective assessment and promotion process, considering individual achievements and contributions regardless of gender. b). Pay attention to women's representation in the assessment and promotion process to ensure fairness and equality.	Adopt a more transparent and performance-based reward and promotion system.	Create more inclusive assessment metrics that comprehensively consider women's impact and contributions.
Performance				

Overall, the research findings emphasize the complexity of achieving gender equality and overcoming the glass ceiling in the Palu City government. Despite efforts to support gender equality and encourage women's career advancement, many challenges remain to overcome. Meritocracy is seen as a potential solution, but ensuring it is implemented fairly and transparently is

important. Consistent with previous research findings showing that the glass ceiling is a common phenomenon in many local governments, this results in gender inequality in the bureaucratic workforce, where women often feel they are not treated fairly by the organization.

Therefore, further efforts are needed to create an inclusive work environment and support the career advancement of female civil servants in the Palu City government by implementing a fair and transparent merit system as well as providing support and development by providing mentoring and coaching programs specifically for female civil servants and providing access to leadership development programs and relevant training, including management and communication skills. Apart from that, the Palu City government can also implement training and education, especially for female civil servants, which focuses on women's issues in the workplace, such as time management, salary negotiation, or work-life balance, as well as encouraging women's participation in further education programs or courses. Relevant to the field of work, such as management or information technology courses.

Conclusion

Based on research results, the glass ceiling phenomenon in Palu City includes obstacles such as gender stereotypes, limited authority, and conflicts that affect the career advancement of female civil servants. However, the glass ceiling can motivate them to struggle and take proactive steps to develop their careers. The Palu City Government has taken steps to overcome the glass ceiling by implementing a meritocracy system that emphasizes assessment based on achievement and competency and provides fair and transparent support for female civil servants.

This research makes an essential contribution to the scientific field by deepening our understanding of the glass ceiling phenomenon and the implementation of meritocracy in the context of local government, especially in Palu City. Practically, this research offers valuable insights for policymakers about the importance of implementing fair and transparent meritocracy and the need for moral and social support for female civil servants. These findings can be the basis for the government to design more inclusive policies, such as special training and skills development programs for women and more accurate and fair reward mechanisms, which are expected to increase women's participation and career advancement in the public sector. Limitations of this research include the limited area coverage of Palu City and the limited number of informants. Therefore, for further research, expanding the regional coverage and number of informants is recommended to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the glass ceiling phenomenon and the implementation of meritocracy in various regions.

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