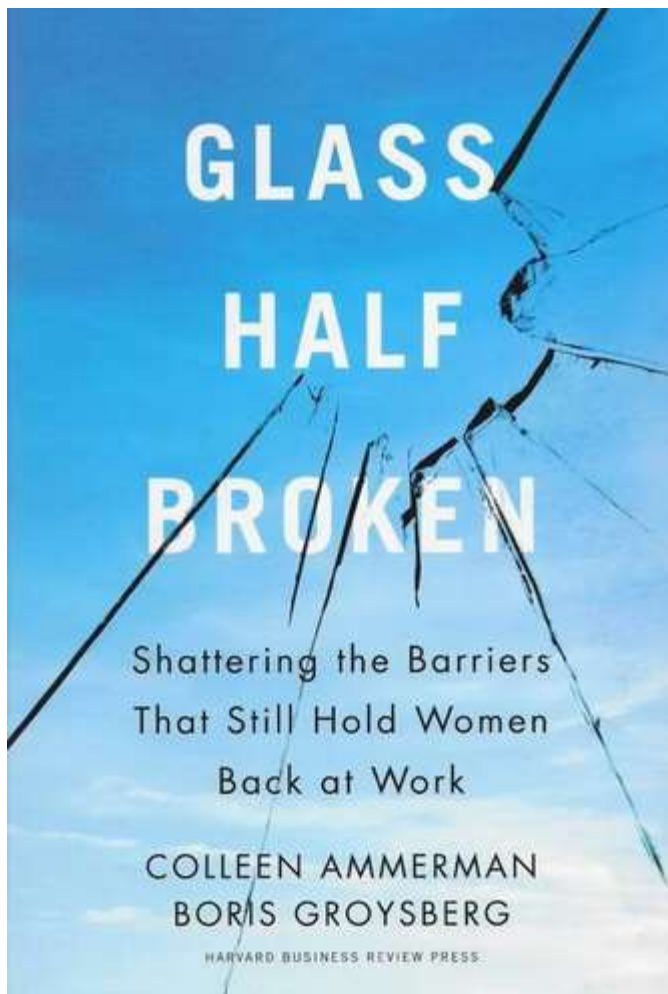


‘Glass Half Broken’ is action-provoking

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“Glass Half Broken: Shattering the Barriers That Still Hold Women Back at Work” by Colleen Ammerman and Boris Groysberg. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2021. 304 pages, \$30 (hardcover).



“In 2020, just 13 of the companies on Fortune’s Global 500 list – the world’s largest companies by revenue – were led by women, and none of those female CEOs were women of color,” Colleen Ammerman and Boris Groysberg note near the beginning of “Glass Half Broken: Shattering the Barriers That Still Hold Women Back at Work,” their treatise on an old problem in the workplace. “In the United States, women have received the majority of undergraduate degrees, prerequisites for high-earning jobs, since the 1980s.”

“Across all racial and ethnic categories tracked by the federal government, women earn more than half of college degrees,” they continue. “The gates have been opened, and women have stepped through – yet they have found themselves staring down a set of obstacles that can’t be adjudicated away.”

So begins a meticulous journey into the gender inequality that still permeates most of our societal institutions. Despite significant progress in the past few decades, the reality is that although the percentage of men and women in the workforce continues to narrow,

men are still overrepresented in leadership roles; i.e., positions of status and power. This is also true in fields where women constitute the majority of the workforce.

Ammerman and Groysberg set out on a deceptively complex quest to answer a relatively simple question, “Why?”

Integrating studies from a variety of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, leadership studies, organizational behavior and economics, the authors do an exceptional job of distilling the knowledge and insights inherent in the data to explain both how we arrived at the current moment and, more importantly, what we can do to proactively move the needle in a more equitable direction. Personally, I was impressed by the balance exhibited in their prose; they devote roughly an equal amount of time to defining the challenges women face and to offering viable strategies for overcoming those obstacles.

Their book is extensively researched, with 21 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the introduction, six chapters arranged in two major sections, conclusion and epilogue that form the

main narrative. Part One, “Office Obstacle Course,” consists of the first three chapters, while Part Two, “Clearing the Path to Gender Equality at Work,” is made up of the final three chapters. The writing style is conversational and compelling; it is obvious from the very first page that Ammerman and Groysberg are on a mission to illuminate and prescribe. The passion they have for the subject matter they navigate so effortlessly is evident throughout the manuscript – and the arguments they make are difficult to refute in any meaningful sense.

As the authors convincingly contend, the reasons for the gender discrepancies in the managerial ranks of many companies, agencies and other concerns are varied and interrelated. It is worth noting, however, that this is not a book that sets out to blame men for the plight of women, which only tends to precipitate defensiveness and a lack of productive discourse on the relevant issues. Ammerman and Groysberg assert that there is a huge systemic component to the discrimination faced by women on a daily basis; as such, the remedy must include a complete response. And nowhere is this systemic bias more pervasive than in the realm of compensation.

“The gender pay gap has long been one of the most talked-about challenges facing women at work, and in recent years discussion has accelerated with investigations and lawsuits faced by high-profile organizations such as Google, Walmart, Nike and Microsoft and even the Boston Symphony Orchestra,” the authors observe in “Becoming a Glass-Shattering Organization,” the fifth chapter and one I found particularly enlightening. “Dialogue on the topic has expanded to include not only ‘adjusted’ pay gaps, which control for things such as job title and tenure and thus appear when men and women are being paid unequally for the same job, but also companies’ ‘median’ pay gaps, which simply report the overall difference between what men and women make and thus reflect the fact that women are often concentrated at lower levels.”

“Gender-based compensation disparities often start before an employee is hired,” they continue a little later. “When the terms and parameters of a salary negotiation are unclear, women consistently end up with lower starting salaries than men, even when controlling for factors that should predict salary, such as job function and geographic location. Simply making explicit that a salary offer is negotiable eliminates the differential between men’s and women’s likelihood to try to negotiate. Ambiguity might reside in something as fundamental as the appropriate salary range for a position.”

Director of the Harvard Business School Gender Initiative, Ammerman has a B.A. from Emmanuel College, M.A.s from Simmons College and the University of Chicago and a credential of readiness from Harvard Business School Online. She is a member of the Life & Leadership After HBS research team, an ongoing longitudinal study of Harvard Business School alumni that examines the influence of gender and race on their life and career outcomes. Groysberg is the Richard P. Chapman Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School and a faculty affiliate at the Gender Initiative. The recipient of several awards and honors for his research, his previous book, “Chasing Stars: The Myth of Talent and the Portability of Performance,” is widely considered to be a management classic.

In the introduction, Ammerman and Groysberg lay out what they hope to accomplish with the book: “We hope that readers come away with a better understanding of the systemic disadvantages that aspiring and actual female leaders face and then turn a clear eye on their own teams, department and companies. But this book is also meant to remind readers of how far we’ve come. Subtle yet obdurate barriers continue to stand in the way of gender parity, but the glass is riddled with cracks.”

Indeed it is. Moreover, I am happy to report that the authors achieved their aspirations for this exquisite and action-provoking volume. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.