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## A Rawlsian Framework for Understanding and Disassembling the Glass Ceiling

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### Abstract

The glass ceiling continues to be one of the most persistent and structurally embedded mechanisms of gender inequality in contemporary organisations. Although scholars have extensively analysed this development through sociological, managerial, and economic frameworks, these approaches often fail to capture the deeper moral and philosophical dimensions of workplace discrimination. This research presents an extensive philosophical review using John Rawls's *Theory of Justice*. By applying Rawls's principles particularly the Veil of Ignorance, the Two Principles of Justice, and the Difference Principle, the paper argues that gender barriers to leadership results in fundamental violations of justice as fairness.

The glass ceiling creates institutional arrangements that preserve morally capricious disadvantages. It fails to uphold fair equality of opportunity and erode the social bases of women's self-respect, Rawls identifies this as the most important primary good. Feminist researchers such as Gilligan, Pateman and Mills uncover how patriarchal criteria, concealed stereotypes, and gender based cultural writing cross with Rawlsian injustices to make lasting inequality right at the structural level.

The article concludes by proposing a Rawlsian framework for organisational restructuring. This includes rightful structures of opportunity, gender inclusive leadership pipelines, transparent evaluation mechanisms, positive interventions justified under the Difference Principle, and the creation of environments that support the social bases of women's self-respect. These reforms demonstrate that dismantling the glass ceiling is a moral necessity grounded in principles of justice, fairness, and human dignity.

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### Keywords:

Rawlsian Justice;  
Glass Ceiling;  
Gender inequality;  
Distributive Justice;  
Organizational Ethics.

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## Introduction

Gender inequality continues to be a defining feature of modern workplaces despite decades of legislative, organisational, and cultural efforts to promote equality. Women today enter the workforce in huge numbers, achieve higher levels of education than men in many regions, and increasingly occupy mid level professional roles. Yet their presence in leadership position remains very low in both public and private domain. This development is generally called as the “glass ceiling”. It denotes the invisible barriers that keep competent women from progressing into senior leadership roles (Parker & Funk, 2020). Although the concept is widely recognised, the depth of the injustice it represents is often underestimated.

Existing research commonly approaches the glass ceiling through empirical or managerial frameworks. Organisational behaviour investigation shows the factors such as inherent prejudice, web of regularity and stereotype driven judgement. Social science highlights structural obstruction, incorporating occupational separatism, gender based role expectations and discriminatory norms integrated within organisational cultures. Economists point to wage gaps, labour market division and human capital differences. While these analyses are valuable, they fail to speak on the deeper moral importance of lasting gender inequality. The issue isn't merely if discrimination is present or how it functions, but rather if the fundamental organization structure is morally justifiable.

To address the gap, this research applies John Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, one of the most influential philosophical frameworks of the twentieth century, as a lens for evaluating gender inequality in the workplace. Rawls's endeavor centers around the notion that equitable societies need to ensure fairness, eliminate morally arbitrary inequalities, and create institutions that regard individuals as autonomous and equal moral agents (Rawls, 1971). When applied to gender based workplace structures, Rawls's principles expose the ethical illegitimacy of organisational arrangements that preserve systemic disadvantage for women.

The Rawlsian framework is particularly well suited to examining the glass ceiling for three reasons. First, Rawls stresses that justice is fundamentally about **the structure of institutions**, not the behaviour of individuals. This directly questions the story that, blame women for unable to get used to masculine norms (Gilligan,1982). Second, Rawls's idea of **fair equality of opportunity** postulates not simply open competition but truly equal access something organisational systems usually fail to provide. Third, Rawls views **self-respect** as the most important primary good, necessary for pursuing meaningful life plans (Rawls, 1999). The glass ceiling deeply undermines women's self-respect by saying that their abilities and aspirations are not so important.

Therefore, the glass ceiling must be comprehended not only as a social science based result but as a violation of justice at deep moral levels. It denies women equal moral worth, restricts access to primary goods, permits advantages, and erodes the conditions necessary for human dignity. The Rawlsian framework reveals that gender inequality is not simply an organisational inefficiency but an ethical failure of institutional structure.

However, Rawls is not the only one to present a philosophical framework pertinent to this inquiry. Feminist theorists such as Pateman and Mills (2007), argue that modern establishments continue to reproduce patriarchal contract relations under the deception of neutrality. Gilligan's (1982) work establishes how gender based moral development and cultural expectations shape perceptions of ability and power. When combined with Rawls, these perspectives shed light on the complex philosophical and structural aspects that preserve gender inequality.

Empirical information strengthens the philosophical analysis. In nursing profession where women make up the overwhelming majority, men still go up to leadership roles quicker and acquire disproportionate recognition for the same tasks (Gauci et al., 2021). This irony undermines claims that insufficiency of women representation in leadership is due to lack of involvement or quality. Rather, it shows that gender bias is integrated within institutional structures themselves even in professions culturally associated with women.

## CONCEPTUALISING THE GLASS CEILING

The glass ceiling must be understood not as a single barrier but as a complex system of interwoven forces that structure organisational life. Contemporary research systematically reveals that gender inequality continues because the barriers women face are integrated not only in explicit policies or explicit discrimination but in subtle structures, cultural norms, economic arrangements, ideological frameworks, psychological processes, and inter sectional dynamics (Parker & Funk, 2020). A philosophical study of the glass ceiling therefore requires a holistic analysis that recognises how these different dimensions come together to produce a long-lasting pattern of inequality. This section elaborates these dimensions and demonstrates why the glass ceiling is fundamentally a structural injustice that cannot be addressed through individual solutions.

### Invisible Structures of Inequality

Structural barriers are among the most deeply embedded and least visible contributors to the glass ceiling. They form the organisational structure that shapes who enters leadership pipelines, who receives mentorship, and who is perceived as competent or promotable. Although organisations often claim tolerance believing that formal policies ensure fairness the outcomes frequently reveal gender based patterns that expose the limitations of procedural equality (Rawls, 1971).

Leadership selection and performance evaluations are primary examples. Numerous studies show that organisations tend to reward characteristics historically associated with masculinity, such as positivity, task oriented leadership, and dominant communication styles. Women who display these traits are often punished for violating gender norms, while those who do not are framed as lacking leadership capacity (Gilligan, 1982).

Another structural feature is network homogeneity. Senior position roles are often occupied through informal web and mentor ship. They are totally dominated by men. Access to these

web is related directly with chance for progression, women face systemic omission despite equal competence. For Rawls, such systems violate the principle of **fair equality of opportunity**, which requires more than formal access—it requires disassembly obstacles that prevent individuals from competing on truly balanced terms (Rawls, 1999).

Organisational structures also determine access to high visibility delegations and opportunities to develop skills. As it is always shown in research, men receive stimulating delegations that provides way to leadership development. However, women are excessively provided with administrative or routine work (Parker & Funk, 2020). These different career path reflect institutionally produced inequalities rather than built-in differences in ability or ambition.

The overall effect is a hidden and permanent structure that silently directs men upward and women sideways. A Rawlsian perspective exposes these structures not merely as inefficient but as morally unfair, as they systematically distribute opportunities based on gender.

Stereotypes which are Normalised

Organisational cultures which operate based on common assumptions casual norms, expectations which are never spoken, shape day to day interactions. Gender based cultural norms particularly those associating leadership with masculine traits uphold stereotypes that influence how women's competence, behaviour, and leadership potential are interpreted (Pateman & Mills, 2007).

Cultural stereotypes influence perceptions at every level. Women who are assertive are labelled aggressive, women who are collaborative are labelled weak, women who express emotion are labelled unstable. However, similar behaviours in men are interpreted positively as confidence and authority. These double standards strengthen prejudiced power structure while maintaining an illusion of neutrality.

Such norms also influence expectations about work family roles. Even in progressive organizations, women are often expected to prioritize household chores or care-giving. Because of this, coworkers or managers might deny them demanding jobs based more on assumptions about their availability than on actual constraints (Gauci 2021). These cultural biases distort organisational decision making by substituting gender based assumptions for objective evaluation.

Concept of Rawls's moral **distinctions** directly challenges cultural biases (Rawls 1971). The problem escalates when culturally manufactured stereotypes provides paths to opportunities. Inequalities resulting because of this cannot be justified within a Rawlsian framework. Cultural practices that penalise women for gender based behaviours, thus represent not only sociological barriers but moral betrayal.

## Pay gap and Occupational Structure

In spite of possessing equivalent qualifications and experience women consistently earn less than men in similar positions (Parker & Funk, 2020). This gap in wages grow significantly at higher levels. This strengthens the long-term economic consequences of gender bias.

Structural disadvantage which is product of occupational separation pushes women into undervalued fields such as teaching, house-keeping, nursing, and care-taking. These professions are historically associated with women and hence receive lower social and financial valuation. Men on the other hand when ascend to leadership roles at disproportionately in the same fields which are historically associated with women. This exemplifies what researchers call the “glass escalator” effect (Gauci et al., 2021).

When we look at this from a Rawlsian perspective, **Difference Principle is violated by these disparities**. Since Difference Principal permits inequalities only if they benefit the least advantaged (Rawls, 1999). Gender based inequalities fail this criterion, they do not benefit women, who constitute a structurally disadvantaged group. Instead, they reinforce male advantage in both income and status. Economic inequality thus represents violation of justice as fairness.

### *The Myths of Choice and Meritocracy*

***When it ignores the fact that not everyone has the same chances to succeed, meritocracy becomes a myth. If men receive more mentorship, networking opportunities, and high visibility assignments, they are more likely to build the credentials that are later interpreted as merit. Women’s lack of progress is then framed not as a structural inequality but as a personal lack of aspiration (Pateman & Mills, 2007).***

The argument that women opt out of leadership roles by choice ignores the cultural and structural constraints which are inbuilt and they shape women’s choices. As argued by MacIntyre (1988), social structures encompasses human agency within and hence it enables or limits the range of choices accessible. Rawls (1999) similarly stresses that personal preferences cannot justify institutional arrangements that undermine justice or equality.

### *Internalised Barriers and Self-Perception*

Organisational discrimination produces deep psychological effects. Women exposed to repeated bias may internalise stereotypes, experience doubt their leadership abilities (Gilligan, 1982). The inevitable consequence of such environments that undervalue women’s contributions is lack of self confidence. It can’t be blamed as private psychological failures.

Rawls emphasises that institutions must protect the **social bases of self respect**, the primary good necessary for individuals to pursue meaningful life plans (Rawls, 1999). The glass ceiling effect damages women’s self respect by denoting that their capabilities and

aspirations are less valued. When organisations repeatedly fail to promote qualified women, the message is clear, it is gender and not merit that shapes access to leadership.

Thus, psychological impacts are not incidental harms they are evidence of structural injustice. Besides, women who belong to underprivileged groups face many more barriers that deepen the effects of the glass ceiling (Shelby, 2004).

Rawls's advocacy on prioritising the least advantaged requires organisations to address these compounded harms. Structural justice demands attention to the experiences of women at the junction of multiple forms of oppression.

### Rawl's Theory of Justice

Modern Political Philosophy is revived by John Rawls and his '*A Theory of Justice*' (1971, 1999), offers an elaborate account of fairness that can be implemented in evaluating the institutions. This also includes workplace structures that preserve gender inequality. Although Rawls did not expressly provide a theory of gender, the core components of his philosophical framework the Original Position, the Veil of Ignorance, the Two Principles of Justice, the Difference Principle, and the emphasis on primary goods offer a rigorous moral framework for analysing the continuity of the glass ceiling. Gender based organisational power structure is exposed by John Rawls as fundamentally unjust arrangements that no rational individual would accept under conditions of equality.

Rawls's theory has a thought experiment which provides a foundation to his theory, it is called the **Original Position**. In this thought experiment hypothetical individuals are asked to design the structure of a society behind a **Veil of Ignorance**. They are prevented by the veil from knowing their gender, race, socioeconomic status, talents, or natural abilities (Rawls, 1971). This veil makes sure that individuals adopt principles that are fair because they don't know where they will end up in that society. When this framework is applied to gender based workplace inequalities, the injustice of the glass ceiling becomes unmistakably clear. A sensible person who is unaware of their gender would endorse a system where women face discriminatory hiring practices, biased performance evaluations, slower promotion paths and cultural stereotypes that undermine their professional credibility. Since the veil has removed knowledge of their gender, it gets rid of the rationale for structuring a society which is biased towards a particular gender.

Rawls's notion of primary goods include rights, liberties, opportunities, income, wealth, and the social bases of self respect, all of which individuals require to pursue meaningful life plans (Rawls, 1999). Women are denied equal access to several categories of these goods by organizational structures that support the glass ceiling. Women's professional opportunities are limited because they are often excluded from leadership roles (Parker & Funk, 2020). Women's income and security is reduced by wage discrimination (Gauci, 2021). The social bases of women's self-respect is undermined gender stereotypes as they send continuous messages that their abilities and leadership styles are less valued than men's (Gilligan, 1982).

Since primary goods must be distributed fairly as argued by Rawls, therefore, unless justified by principles of justice, the gender based distribution of these goods in current workplaces directly violates Rawlsian concept of fairness.

Individuals behind the Veil of Ignorance as argued by Rawls, would select two principles to regulate society. Equal basic liberties for all is guaranteed by The **First Principle of Justice**. Women's talents are infringed by biased evaluations, gendered stereotypes, or cultural assumptions about leadership suitability. Rawls (1999) insists that equality should not merely be a formality, it ought to be meaningful. Hence organisations that claim equal opportunity while keeping gender based barriers fail to meet Rawls's requirement that basic liberties be equal to all.

The **Second Principle of Justice**, comprising Fair Equality of Opportunity (FEO) and the Difference Principle, provides an even deeper critique of gendered hierarchies. Rawls differentiates between formal equality where everyone is nominally free to apply for positions and **fair** equality, which requires that individuals with similar talents and ambitions have genuinely equal chances of success (Rawls, 1971). This difference is important in understanding workplaces that present a cover of neutrality, however, when we look at them closely we realise they reproduce gender based bias through informal means, biased mentoring practices, stereotyped expectations, and masculine based leadership norms. As highlighted by Fia and Sacconi (2019), organisational fairness must be assessed through outcomes as well as procedures. Although the processes may seem neutral, such as, performance evaluations, can have cultural bias and systematically support men. Since genuine equality of opportunity cannot be guaranteed by such system, they violate Rawls's second principle.

Difference Principle says that only if they improve the condition of the least advantaged members of society social and economic inequalities are permitted (Rawls, 1971). Rawls argues that existing gender based inequalities not only lack justification but represent a failure of institutional morality. The difference principle offers a solid philosophical foundation for positive actions intended to address established disadvantages. Contrary to claims that positive action represent unfair discriminatory treatment, Rawls's framework sees such measures as moral obligations that correct structural injustice and reduce the impact of discretionary disadvantages (Rawls, 1999).

Underlying Rawls's critique is the insistence that gender is a **morally arbitrary characteristic**. People do not choose their gender, nor does gender in and of itself determine leadership ability, intelligence or organisational competence. As a result, any institutional structure that consistently favors men over women distributes advantage on unethical grounds (Rawls, 1971). Pateman and Mills (2007) argue that patriarchal social contracts have historically enclosed male privilege into modern institutions, while Gilligan (1982) shows how gender based expectations shape both moral reasoning and perceptions of competence. Rawls's rejection of arbitrary discrimination thus correspond with feminist critiques and supports a structural transformation of organisational norms.

Fundamental to Rawls's view is the protection of **self-respect**, which he calls "perhaps the most important primary good" because it enables individuals to pursue their goals with confidence and moral agency (Rawls, 1999). Gender based workplaces often damage women's self-respect through repeated experiences of undervaluation, invisibility and exclusion from decision making processes. Their sense of self worth and professional identity is undermined when women continuously face obstacles and the legitimacy of their leadership is questioned. Since the institutions ought to support and not belittle the conditions necessary for self-respect it violates Rawls's requirement.

Rawls insists rules must be invulnerable to all reasonable persons as well as institutions and they should be justified by public reason (Rawls, 1993). No credible moral argument could justify women being paid less than men for equal work, being excluded from leadership networks, or being judged according to stereotypes rather than competence. As a result, gendered workplace practices lack moral legitimacy and fail the Rawlsian test of public justification.

An essential Rawlsian insight is that gender is a morally arbitrary trait. Organizations cannot allocate rights, opportunities, and benefits based on traits that individuals do not choose, such as gender, race, or class, according to Rawls (1971). Defenders of the status quo sometimes claim that differences in leadership representation arise from innate preferences or natural differences in temperament. Such claims reflect patriarchal assumptions rather than empirical realities as argued by Pateman and Mills (2007). Gendered cultural expectations give birth to the perceptions of masculine traits as leadership qualities rather than objective measures of competence as argued by Gilligan (1982).

Rawls's Maximin strategy provides further support for critiquing gender inequality. The Maximin rule suggests that institutions should be organised to increase the life prospects of those who are worst off (Rawls, 1971). Philosophically, Rawls's Maximin criterion obligates organisations to design policies such as equitable mentorship programmes, transparent promotion process, and gender balanced leadership paths that counteract historical discrimination.

There are many "fix the women" approaches, which are criticised by feminist scholars like Young (1990), wrongly attribute structural failures to individual shortcomings. Rawls would argue that women should not have to alter their personalities to conform to masculine norms of assertiveness or competitiveness in order to survive professionally. Instead, institutions must transform their structures, evaluation processes, and cultural expectations to eliminate discriminatory barriers. The moral responsibility lies not with women to adapt but with organisations to reform. Research demonstrates that women are penalised for assertive behaviour, whereas, men are rewarded for the same (Parker & Funk, 2020).

Shelby's (2004) Rawlsian analysis of race shows how the Veil of Ignorance demands attention to intersecting forms of subordination. When Dalit women, or disabled women face deeper barriers than privileged and middle-class women, the injustice gets multiplied.

Protecting the least advantaged obligates institutions to address inequalities all across the board instead of focusing only on gender in isolation as argued by Rawls.

Taken together, these philosophical insights demonstrate that the glass ceiling violates Rawlsian justice at every level. Gender inequality is not an unfortunate organisational flaw but a structural injustice that undermines fair equality of opportunity, fails the Difference Principle, distributes primary goods unfairly, erodes the social bases of self-respect, relies on morally arbitrary distinctions, and lacks public justification. From a Rawlsian perspective, then, dismantling the glass ceiling is not optional, it is a moral need based in the principles of justice as fairness.

### **Research in the Department of Nursing**

A crucial example of how gender inequalities prevail even in female dominated fields, can be seen in the nursing profession. This will clearly illustrate the structural injustice, its depth and complexity of the glass ceiling.

Nursing is globally recognised as a profession in which women constitute between 80 to 95 percent of the workforce, yet ironically, men in nursing ascend into higher administrative and leadership positions at disproportionate rates (Gauci, 2021). This process is often described as the “glass escalator,” shows that the presence of women in large numbers does not automatically translate into gender equality. The profession shows a failure of fair equality of opportunity, primary goods being distributed unjustly, and the self-respect of women being eroded through structural arrangements. This contradicts the moral foundations of justice as fairness based on structural arrangements when looked through the Rawlsian framework.

Research shows that men receive more encouragement to pursue promotions, are more actively mentored for leadership, and are often perceived as more authoritative because leadership remains culturally coded as masculine (Gauci, 2021). The requirement of fair equality of opportunity is violated by these patterns based on Rawlsian principles because informal practices seem to undermines the formal access to leadership favouring one gender over another.

Wage disparity further demonstrates the Rawlsian injustice embedded within nursing. Male nurses often earn higher salaries than their female colleagues, in spite of having equal workload and qualifications. Difference Principle is violated by wage discrepancies, which allows inequalities only if they benefit the least advantaged (Rawls, 1999). Gender based wage gaps do not improve conditions for women rather, they reinforce the structural privileges enjoyed by men. Since gender is a morally random characteristic, financial rewards being distributed along gender based lines fail to meet Rawls’s requirement for justice in institutional structures. This effects women’s long-term economic stability. The idea of John Rawls that institutions must secure fair distributions of primary goods, including income and wealth is contradicted in the long term here.

Emotional labour is always expected to be performed by women. These tasks, essential to quality care are often undervalued, perceived as part of feminine nature. Hence, they are less likely to be rewarded or recognised in promotion systems (Parker & Funk, 2020). Men, on the other hand, are more likely to be directed toward technical or crisis management tasks that are viewed as more prestigious. These cultural patterns reflect what Pateman and Mills (2007) identify as the continuing influence of patriarchal assumptions within institutions, where tasks coded as feminine are devalued while masculine coded roles are highlighted.

limited recognition and chronic undervaluation experienced by women often develop negative beliefs about their leadership abilities. Women may feel less confident in seeking promotions and going to higher roles unattainable due to repeated exposure to biased treatment. These harms fit with Gilligan's (1982) findings on how gender based experiences develop moral comprehension of identity. Self-respect is identified as the most important of the primary goods by (Rawls, 1999), because it shows an individual's ability to pursue meaningful life goals. Gender inequalities in nursing shows deep structural injustices that violate Rawls's moral framework.

Basic structure should be designed to support fairness, equality, and respect for all persons, if it ought to be just (Rawls, 1971). Adopting this principle requires a systematic re-evaluation of how leadership pathways, wage structures, cultural norms, and evaluation metrics operate to Nursing profession. Based on Rawlsian framework Informal networks and gender based mentoring patterns that give men disproportionate access to leadership should be dismantled. Competence demonstrated, professional experience and just distribution of development ought to be established as Transparent promotion criteria. With affirmative interventions such as targeted leadership programmes for women, structured mentorship initiatives, and gender balanced search committees become morally justified. This way the institutions may rectify the damage done by arbitrary disadvantage (Rawls, 1999). These practices rectify existing inequities that Rawls would classify as institutional moral failures.

Wage disparities must also be addressed as part of Institutional reforms. Essential actions in line with the Difference Principle include conducting gender wage audits on a regular basis, maintaining transparent pay structures, and making sure that salary increases reflect real responsibilities rather than gendered stereotypes. Because disparities are only acceptable when they help the least fortunate. Rawls's framework mandates proactive correction of wage gaps. Cultural transformation is equally essential. Rawls's insistence that institutions support self-respect requires workplaces to cultivate cultures in which women's leadership is established, validated, and respected. Stereotypes should be challenged by nursing organisations wherein, they associate leadership with masculinity or technical expertise. In fact, they should adopt inclusive definitions of leadership. Gilligan (1982) argues that women's leadership styles, ethical principles may seem different but they are equally valuable in strengths. Bringing in these insights into organisational structures with fulfill Rawls's commitment to focusing on providing equal moral worth for all individuals. Hence the institutions must place the needs of the least advantaged requires nursing organisations to adopt a delicate plan of action that account for multiple layers of oppression.

This case study reveals that the glass ceiling can persist even in professions overwhelmingly staffed by women. This observation reinforces the philosophical conclusion that gender inequality is deeply ingrained within social norms, cultural scripts, and institutional practices that go beyond numerical representation. If justice and fairness is to be achieved, institutions must undertake structural metamorphosis. They should tackle not just overt discrimination, but also the subtle cultural nuances that perpetuate inequality.

## Conclusion

The glass ceiling remains one of the most concerning signs of gender inequality in contemporary society. It signifies not just a career hurdle for women, but also a significant moral shortcoming of the organizations that influence career trajectories, allocate opportunities, and establish social legitimacy. By applying John Rawls's *Theory of Justice* to the glass ceiling, this expanded article exhibit that gendered hierarchies break the foundational principles of justice as fairness, including the riddance of morally arbitrary advantages, the protection of fair equality of opportunity, and the safeguarding of the social bases of self-respect.

Rawls's structure disclose the glass ceiling as more than a social or economic problem, it is a deep structural partiality integrated in organizational cultures and institutional designs. Through the Original Position and the Veil of Ignorance, Rawls make us to visualize institutional set up that no reasonable person would accept if they were oblivious of their future gender role. By applying the Two Principles of Justice and the Difference Principle, he insists that everyone should have genuine access to opportunities and that social inequalities should benefit those who are least advantaged. Through his vehemence on self-respect, he highlights the psychological damage imposed by prejudiced systems.

The application of Rawls's theory to the nursing profession further uncover the continuity of gender inequalities even in fields where women form the majority. These inequalities—like differences in wages, imbalances in leadership roles, and cultural prejudices—highlight the prevalence of patriarchal systems across various sectors.

Furthermore, a comprehensive philosophical and structural reconstruction of organizational justice is necessary to break through the glass ceiling. It requires organizations to plan their systems, challenge their presumptions, give voice to underrepresented groups, and implement fair practices that align with Rawlsian ideals. According to Rawls, justice is an active process of making sure that institutions represent equality, justice, and dignity for all people rather than a passive state. If workplaces are to embody the ideals of a just society, they must eliminate the glass ceiling not as an act of charity or compliance but as a moral necessity rooted in the ethical foundation of justice as fairness.

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