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# Breaking the Glass Ceiling on Wikipedia

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## introduction

Wikipedia suffers from a significant gender gap. According to different studies, as little as 8 to 16 per cent of editors are female (Lam *et al.*, 2011; Wikimedia Foundation, 2011). These numbers may be somewhat distorted, as some females may choose to opt out of surveys or conceal their gender online in a community that is generally perceived as dominated by males (Hill and Shaw, 2013). Still, it is quite clear that, although for readers the proportions are pretty much equal, for editors the gender gap is really big (Glott *et al.*, 2010; Bywater, 2011) and difficult to explain just by the stereotypical, geek-driven background of Wikipedia or simply the reproduction of inequalities (Morell, 2010).

One possible explanation is that Wikipedia is quite conflict-driven (Jemielniak, 2014), and the critical cooperative environment in which it thrives deters many female editors (Collier and Bear, 2012). The problem is not specific to Wikipedia alone as, in general, the F/L/OSS (Free Libre and Open Source) movement is suffering from it (Reagle, 2013).

However, on Wikipedia this problem has dire consequences and also many layers. For instance, biographies of women on Wikipedia are less developed; it is more likely that a biography of a woman will be missing when compared with *Encyclopaedia Britannica* even though Wikipedia as a whole has better coverage, and research shows that male editors are less likely to edit women's biographies (Reagle and Rhue, 2011). The Wikipedian community also occasionally displays plain sexism; for instance, at some point, a separate 'American women novelists' category was created, whereas male writers remained in the general 'American novelists' category (Filipacchi, 2013). At the same time it is worth mentioning that after exposing this problem, the community addressed it properly and women novelists have since been reincorporated into the general category.

Nevertheless, gender is a complex issue on Wikipedia, which the realisation that articles on topics relevant to feminist and gender studies or others related to minorities rights movements may be more likely to be removed from Wikipedia (Carstensen, 2009) makes visible. To understand the background and reasons for this phenomenon, I present a fieldwork account of an incident related to a gender-related topic (Wikipedia article on 'Glass ceiling'). The described non-fictional incident was a part of my seven-year anthropological fieldwork project on Wikipedia.

## glass ceiling

I began the war unintentionally. In retrospect, I had not seen it coming at all. If I had had even a slight suspicion, maybe I would have tried to play it differently. Nevertheless, it is quite possible that most edit wars on Wikipedia begin exactly in this way.

On some gender studies portal in February 2011 I spotted a discussion on gender bias on the Polish Wikipedia. I entered the discussion and pointed out that even though all articles may have some bias, the general picture is not that bad, and also that instead of criticising Wikipedia from the sidelines, the disputants could actually help make it better. My appeal was probably a bit naïve, as the people with the fiercest critique clearly wanted to find some fault in Wikipedia. Still, these people succeeded; they pointed out a couple of examples of articles that served as an impulse to immediate action. I wanted to improve these articles as soon as possible, so that they would not be the laughing stock of social media. Because their discussion and bitter comments were getting attention through content aggregators on social networks, I felt the urge to intervene quickly.

One of the examples was ‘Glass ceiling’. I had a look at the article, whined and frantically started to rewrite it.

Its first paragraph stated:

‘Glass ceiling’ (or: sticky floor)—a term created in the 80s, describing the unseen barrier, keeping women (and also ethnic, sexual or religious minorities) from rising to the higher positions in business and politics. (Wikipedia, 2015)

I left this section unaltered. I did, however, make the following changes to the next paragraph:

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*Original text of the article at that time*

From feminist perspective this phenomenon is explained by discrimination, chauvinism and bias. From scientific perspective, by smaller stress resistance accompanying competition in social status rivalry[1][2].

[1] Prezeski i tajemnica szklanego sufitu. *Rzeczpospolita*, 26 November 2008. Available at: [www.rp.pl/arttykul/82677,224749\\_Prezeski\\_i\\_tajemnica\\_szklanego\\_sufitu\\_.html](http://www.rp.pl/arttykul/82677,224749_Prezeski_i_tajemnica_szklanego_sufitu_.html)

[2] Evren Örs, Frédéric Palomino, Eloïc Peyrache: The performance gender gap: Does competition matter? Centre for Economic Policy Research. Available at: [www.voxeu.org/index.php?q=node/1435](http://www.voxeu.org/index.php?q=node/1435)

*My edit (replacing the text on the left)*

The phenomenon is ‘unseen’, because often in particular cases of promotion denial organisations find different excuses, but yet on the level of population it is statistically observable that women (and other minorities) having the same qualifications as men are less frequently promoted and receive lower salaries.

The reasons for the glass ceiling can be found in established social roles [1], which ascribe leading roles to men, in traditional division of family and household duties (according to which women more often do housework and childcare) [2], as well as in the creation of the ‘occupational ghettos’ (offering women positions in which career ladder is shorter) [3].

[1] Rothenbuhler, E. W., 1998/2003. *Komunikacja rytualna. Od rozmowy codziennej do ceremonii medialnej (Ritual Communication. From Everyday Conversation to Mediated Ceremony)*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego

[2] Hochschild, A. R., and Machung, A., 1989. *The second shift: working parents and the revolution at home*. New York, NY: Viking

[3] Charles, M., and Grusky, D. B., 2004. *Occupational ghettos: the worldwide segregation of women and men*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press

As can be seen above, I deleted the paragraph that suggests a feminist perspective is contradictory to a scientific one, falsely represents state-of-the-art research as dismissive of discrimination and bias, and presents these views as reasons for the glass ceiling phenomenon. I also added what I thought was a rock-solid, impeccable description of the term along with proper academic sources.

My contribution lasted about a day and a half. Another Wikipedian, 'Krail',<sup>1</sup> annulled it. I was angry. I had put some time and effort into the article, and Krail deleted my work in a second. I spotted his action within less than an hour and immediately rolled the article back (with a special one-click tool that reverses edits without having to provide an explanation and is typically reserved for vandalism) to my version. But then I started to think. Krail was a relatively experienced Wikipedian. I remembered him as a clearly conservative, right-wing editor but well-versed in the rules of Wikipedia. When he annulled my revision, he left a comment in the description of his action: 'please, integrate the new edit into the article, instead of deleting older sources'. This implied that my rollback was questionable and against the rules, as the rollback tool should only be used to reverse clear vandalism. Therefore, after fifteen minutes I rolled back my action (restoring Krail's revision) but also immediately brought back in my own version, this time with a proper description: 'the previous revision does not include scientific resources, an article from a newspaper and from a website do not qualify'.<sup>2</sup> In short, I had to admit that Krail's revision, as much as I despised it, did not fulfil the criteria for a rollback (since it was sourced). Instead, I disputed the quality of the sources that were used.

I hoped it would be enough. Wikipedia has precise rules about verifiability and reliability. For a topic about social sciences, an article from a popular right-wing newspaper usually should not be considered as proper and neither should a website publication. Yet, in less than ten hours Krail struck again, annulling my revision, claiming that my action was violating the verifiability rule, and requesting that I integrate my sources instead of deleting his. He also wrote on my talk page (a separate website address that each registered Wikipedian has that is meant for public discussion) that Wikipedia relies on all verifiable sources, not only academic ones. The VOXEU.org website that I questioned as not fully academic, in his view, was scholarly enough.

My reply was quick and sharp. I warned Krail that removing well-sourced text constituted vandalism and that the sources he used in his edit could not be considered reliable, as they did not satisfy scholarly peer-review standards. His reply was very polite; he stood on the grounds that all verifiable sources should be considered in this case. He wrote that he did not object to my sources—on the contrary, he believed they should stay. He insisted, however, on keeping his paragraph too as, he maintained, it was well-sourced.

I had a dilemma. He was making a point, which could make sense if the dispute went further. I also noted in the history of the 'Glass ceiling' entry that he previously had a discussion about this paragraph with another editor and his version persisted. I realised that if I kept pushing what I thought was the neutral and objective point of view, we were going to end up in 'wheel warring' (switching back and forth between revisions), most likely resulting in both of us being considered as acting below the desired Wikipedian standards and with the results for the article difficult to foresee.

I added three more references to my paragraph, along with a quote: 'The glass ceiling is not simply a barrier for an individual, based on the person's inability to handle a higher-level job. Rather, the glass

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<sup>1</sup>All usernames have been replaced with fictional nicknames in this piece.

<sup>2</sup>It should be noted that Wikipedia has a large number of editing and behavioural rules (easily exceeding 150,000 words, just from the core fifty policies). There are specific rules for proper sources, and priority is given to current academic peer-reviewed journal publications.

ceiling applies to women as a group who are kept from advancing higher “because they are women” (Morrison *et al.*, 1992, p. 13).

Then I went onto the Wikipedia IRC channel (an old, public chat medium that many Wikipedians use) to see whether I could spot any administrators knowledgeable about gender studies. Some I knew quite well and in person, as Wikipedians occasionally meet during organised meetups; some I recognised mainly from editing on similar topics on Wikipedia, but still I was sure they would support my case. Unfortunately, there were none. Therefore, I decided to seek help from Mussar, an administrator with whom I was a bit less familiar. I knew that, even though he was occasionally conservative in his opinions, he was very neutral in his edits. From less formal previous talks on IRC, I also knew that he had recently received his PhD and spent some time as a visiting scholar in San Francisco; thus, I believed he would be sensitive to nuances of academic publishing and reliable sources. I talked to him on IRC briefly, making my point and requesting his perusal of the article and our discussion. He agreed to look into the case, and I was relieved.

My relief did not last long. Mussar restored my part, but also agreed with Krail that his part was verifiable and reliable and should stay too. I replied to both of them that I did not think that a popular newspaper could qualify as a source, that VOXEU.org cannot be considered a venue of final scholarly publication (as it does not have a peer review process and basically publishes reports on new results of studies, which would later be published elsewhere), and that even though a couple of years had passed since the very research in question was reported on VOXEU.org, there were no publications in academic journals resulting from it and so there was a possibility that the research design was flawed or the findings not convincing enough. This persuaded neither of them—Mussar simply stated that in his view, the portal was definitely not shady or dubious and was reliable enough to justify Krail’s paragraph. I have to admit that he was right as the website does have a good reputation and, even if it is not the final publication venue, it still cannot be considered unreliable.

I had to take a different approach. I went to VOXEU.org and carefully read about the reported research. Then, I removed the sentence stating that scientific interpretation is contradictory to the feminist one and explained that this sentence was not sourced—VOXEU.org did not pass judgments in this respect. Second, I moved Krail’s paragraph below mine and also rephrased it into the following:

Unpublished research conducted at HEC School of Management in Paris, on a poll of high-school alumni with science background during university entry exams, may suggest that women are less stress-resistant in social status competitions, which could contribute to the reasons why in France men more often occupy executive positions. (Wikipedia, 2015)

This was it. I technically did leave the source as requested, but I removed the teeth from the message. In retrospect, I think Mussar had not read the primary source in the first place, as he later hastily supported my stance that Krail’s interpretation of the source was misleading and also helped me polish the article further. Krail dropped his objections, for he knew that he had stepped onto a dangerous path—his misinterpreting the data could be construed as an inadvertent slip resulting from referring to simplified (and misleading) newspaper coverage, but also could be considered deliberate falsification of data, which could result in a block.

But what have I learnt from this incident? Maybe that keeping my academic hat and staying cool is really difficult. Maybe that I should have trusted the procedures on Wikipedia from the very beginning and basically verify the sources. Maybe that persistence and understanding the rules well always gives an

advantage in such conflicts. Maybe that fighting gender stereotypes requires patience, calmness and skill. Or maybe I am just deluding myself and I have not learnt anything at all.

## conclusions

The problem is not only that there are considerably fewer female editors, and not only that there are less women with biographies on Wikipedia, and not even that these biographies are typically much less developed (Travis, 2013). As current research shows, Wikipedia articles about women even use different language (Graells-Garrido *et al.*, 2015). Many different biases surface on Wikipedia, possibly because of Wikipedia's mass popularity; Wikipedia basically reflects the biases and phobias present in the general population. Yet, sexism is one of the most powerful ones.

While Wikipedia's community is indeed very egalitarian and deregulated, this also means that there is a lack of formal leadership and naturally emerging leaders have trouble legitimising themselves (Jemielniak, 2015). In such an environment, with dispersed control of behaviour and uncertain enforcement of rules, only the most determined and able to participate in continuous conflicts persist. Without any doubt, 'aggressive reforms bolstering women's sense of agency and encouraging women to write articles are important. Wikipedia's guidelines ask contributors to be welcoming and respectful; but lingering practices rooted in a computer/Internet culture dominated by men undermine this explicit commitment to consensus and collaboration' (Eckert and Steiner, 2013, p. 88).

Yet, what is also important is our participation and editing. As the case presented here shows, good understanding of Wikipedia's many bureaucratic rules (Butler *et al.*, 2008; Aaltonen and Lanzara, 2010) has a huge influence on the outcome of debates. Only if we stay calm and if we are persistent, but also knowledgeable about the policies and customs, can we help the largest and most popular encyclopaedia in the world present accurate, non-biased information.

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