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The Effect of Glass Ceiling on Working Women: A Case Study of Nigeria |
The Effect of Glass Ceiling on Working Women: A Case Study of Nigeria

*Olukemi I. Lawanson Ph.D

Abstract

This study set out to examine some of the factors that are responsible for discrimination against Women in the work place in Nigeria. Primary data in the form of questionnaire was adopted as the Methodology for carrying out the study. A total of 100 copies of questionnaire were administered randomly to men and women who were engaged in the labour force in Lagos City, a Metropolitan City in Nigeria. The results show that although there is little or no difference between the traits, abilities, education and motivation of managerial and professional men and women, few female executives get to senior and top management positions. Secondly, the study found out that Nigerian women managers are young, highly educated, witty and with a modern outlook but their full potentials have not been fully realized because they are seriously constrained by limited access to productive resources. Finally, Nigerian female executives of today suffer from lack of power; this appears to be the most serious problem facing Nigerian women today. Based on the above findings, it is recommended that sensitization programmes at all levels of the hierarchy should be geared to refuting the myths surrounding women's capabilities and dedication to work, improving managers' understanding of gender and family issues.

*Lawanson lectures in the Department of Economics, University of Lagos.*
and endorsing the valuable contribution women can make to an organization's image and to its productivity. In order to compete at par with men, it is also essential that women have access to management training and line experience, mentors and role models at the highest levels, as well as admittance to formal and informal networks and channels of communication at work.

**KEYWORDS:** Glass Ceiling, Working Women, Inequalities

I. **INTRODUCTION**

In Economics, the term “glass ceiling” refers to situations where the advancement of a qualified person within the hierarchy of an organization is stopped at a lower level because of some form of discrimination, most commonly sexism or racism. Glass ceiling is also an unacknowledged, invisible, discriminatory and intangible barrier that prevents women and minorities from rising to the positions of prestige, power, and highest-grossing positions in the workforce, professional advancement and responsibility most especially at managerial levels. This barrier makes many women feel like they are not worthy enough to have these high-ranking positions, but also they feel as if their bosses do not take them as seriously as they should.

This situation is referred to as a “ceiling” as there is a limitation blocking upward advancement, and “glass” (transparent) because the limitation is not immediately apparent and is normally an unwritten and unofficial policy. This invisible barrier continues to exist, even though there are no explicit policies keeping women and minorities from acquiring advanced job positions – there are no advertisements that specifically say “no woman or minorities hired at this establishment”, nor are there any formal orders that say “minorities are not qualified” (largely due to the fact that equal employment opportunity laws forbid this kind of discrimination, and open admittance of it is career suicide) – but they do lie beneath the surface. This usually places a hurdle in the path of professional advancement of women.

Cultural and social attitudes towards what constitutes “male” or “female” jobs result in occupational segregation, although the extent of the problem varies from country to country, and from job to job. Traditionally,
men are concentrated in Engineering, Computer, Health Services, and Banking while women are predominantly concentrated in the traditionally "feminized" professions such as Nursing, Administration, and Teaching especially at lower levels, (horizontal occupational segregation), where at the same time they remain in lower job categories than men (vertical occupational segregation). However, women continue to make small inroads into non-traditional fields such as Law, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Computer Science, and Engineering, and there is evidence that employers are beginning to promote women more systematically and to introduce family-friendly policies in order to retain them.

This paper aims at examining some of the factors that are responsible for discrimination against women in the work place in Nigeria, identify some of the barriers on the path of women that pave the way for occupational segregation against women and suggest ways by which women's role in management can be enhanced.

II. Literature Review

According to Meyerson and Fletcher (2000), despite the increased number of women both participating in the workforce and achieving management positions, the 'glass ceiling' still exists. However, Sturges (1999) observes that men and women may differ in how they measure career success. Men appear to focus on external criteria, such as status and material success, while women focus on management and internal criteria, such as personal recognition, accomplishment, and achieving balance in their lives.

According to Linehan (2001), female managers in every country remain a tiny fraction of those in senior positions. Women managers perceive that they have fewer opportunities than men for promotion to senior management. Lack of a career has been cited as a problem encountered by Australian women managers (Smith, Crowley and Hutchinson, 1993). This upper-level gender segregation results in women remaining concentrated at the bottom of the career ladder even in those areas that are traditionally female dominated. Linehan, Scullion and Walsh (2001) indicate that female international managers have to overcome many additional overt and covert barriers before being developed for international
assignments. These findings show that there is evidence of a "glass ceiling" for women.

Furthermore, Chenevert and Tremblay (2002) also state that even if female managers have a high level of education and the desire to progress in their careers, it is an entrenched fact that only a few achieve the same status or salary as their male counterparts and that one of the reasons for this is the so-called 'glass ceiling.' Meyerson and Fletcher (2000) indicate that despite the increased number of women both participating in the workforce and reaching management positions, the evidence demonstrates that, for the majority, advancement to the very highest levels is rare and that the 'glass ceiling' is still in corporate culture, corporate practices, and corporate climate. This provokes frustration of working women at every level who can see where they want to get to but who find themselves blocked by invisible barriers.

According to the United Nations (2011), there has been significant progress in recent years: more and more women are seeking to transform politics itself, and women’s groups are focusing on efforts to increase women’s representation on the ballot to reinvigorate political accountability. Today, there are more women in government than ever before. The proportion of women parliamentarians at the national level has increased by 8 percent in the decade from 1998 to 2008, to the current global average of 22 percent, compared to an increase of just 1 percent in the two decades after 1975 (United Nations, 2015). Women are outnumbered 4 to 1 in legislatures around the world. As of January 2015, 10 women served as heads of state and 14 as heads of government (United Nations, 2015). Even if the present accelerated rate of increase in women's representation continues as compared to previous decades, we are still a long way from reaching the "parity zone" of 40–60 percent. Yet even at the current rate of increase, developing countries will not reach the 'parity zone' where neither sex holds more than 60% of seats until 2045 (United Nations, 2015).

Okojie (1990) submits that in Nigeria women are considered unsuitable for top management positions because of their disposition, they are perceived as lacking durability. She went further to say that the model of a successful manager has assumed masculine features such as aggression,
competitiveness, and firmness as compared to the female characteristics of being soft, graceful, flexible and dependent.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) (2004) believes that cultural biases, gender stereotypes and attitudes against women, coupled with their not being viewed as primary bread winners, are the major obstacles to women’s advancement. An investigation of the ‘glass ceiling’ suggests that beliefs and attitudes held by organizational staff, as well as the social structures of the organization, contribute to the barriers that impede women’s career advancement.

The number of women who have reached top management positions in the corporate world is significantly lower than their male counterparts. According to Adler and Izraeli (1994) and Metz & Tharenou (2001), three perspectives intend to explain the under representation of women in management positions. First, the person-centred perspective analyses the individual in relation to the requirements for management positions; and explains that women’s lack of managerial traits, competence and career aspirations are the main reasons for their slow advancement. The second is the organization-centred perspective which examines how organizational practices (i.e. performance evaluations and training) and group dynamics (e.g. networks) may contribute to disadvantage women as they have fewer opportunities to move up and lesser power which implies limited access to information and resources. The third is the institutional perspective and it focuses on the impacts of societal and/or cultural values on the organization’s perception of managerial women. Apart from the reasons adduced for women’s under representation in top management positions, organizations are increasingly aware of the need to attract and retain talents. In view of that, organizations implement initiatives which may favour women’s advancement.

Considering each perspective independently may have limitations in explaining the reasons for low representation of women in top management positions. Therefore, women’s slow advancement may be better understood through the interaction of the person, the organization and the social and institutional context. In Ragins and Sundstrom’s view (1989), stereotypes of individuals may be enforced by organizational practices embedded in a social and institutional context with specific characteristics (deriving from e.g. cultural values, histories, ideologies) which influence
both the person and the organization. Furthermore, social-system factors (e.g. socialization based on gender-roles and stereotypes) may influence the choice of industries of individuals before entry into an organization.

The barriers faced by women into and in management positions are very grave according to Tanton (1994). While these barriers have barricaded women aspiring to shatter the "ceiling" they have kept the token representative already in the glass ceiling very lonely. These barriers include the following:

i. Religious/Cultural/Social Barriers
ii. Institutional/Organisational/Structural Barriers
iii. Legislative/Political Barriers
iv. Educational Barriers
v. Gender Based Barriers/Self-Made Barriers

III. Methodology

The methodology adopted for this study is based on primary survey, through the administration of Questionnaires, a total of one hundred (100) copies of questionnaire were administered randomly to men and women who were engaged in the labour force in Lagos City, a Metropolitan City in Nigeria.

The first sample consisted of 50 female executives, randomly selected from both private and public sector organizations in Lagos. They represent the majority of women occupying middle and top management positions in banking institutions, parastatals, public companies, the civil service etc in Lagos. The second set of sample consisted of a corresponding 50 male executives randomly selected in the same organizations as the female managers.

A purposive sampling frame was used in this research work; sampling units were selected because they could offer the contributions sought. The data from the questionnaire covered:

- Male attitudes toward women in management.
- Role conflicts between the traditional role of women as wives, mothers and their new role as managers.
- Gender discrimination in terms of appointment, function and advancement.
• Sex stereotyping: managerial function is seen as an exclusive preserve of men which therefore requires masculine qualities that women are not thought to possess.

• The perception of the female folks of themselves; what it has been and what it is now.

• Education of women, suspicion and hostility towards their jobs traditionally believed to be reserved for men.

IV. Data Analysis

The results that were generated from the Survey are presented using frequency and percentages in tabular form below:

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Table 4.1: Sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled from Field Survey, 2014.

Table 4.1 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents. It shows that both male and females were equally selected with each having 50 per cent respectively.

Table 4.2: Distribution of opinion of males about women being capable managers or not.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>Number of Male Respondents</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capable</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not capable</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled from Field Survey, 2014.
The analysis of opinion of male managers in the Table above about Nigerian women in management shows that women executives are very capable.

- 74% of male respondents believed that Nigerian women executives were capable managers and possessed characteristics that were similar to male executives; only 26% believed in sex-stereotyping and therefore considered Nigerian women executives incapable.

Table 4.3: Responses of female managers as to whether there was pressure from male managers for women executives to live up to expectation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pressure from Male Managers</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled from Field Survey, 2014.

Results in Table 4.3 above shows that only 40% of women executives experienced some kind of pressure while the majority of them (60%) did not experience any pressure.

- This outcome demonstrates that Nigerian male managers have come to recognize the role and worth of women executives. That men have realized that women managers are as competent as men as against the traditional notion about women being considered inferior and unintelligent.

The study also tried to find out whether gender stereotypes were clearly not just perpetuated by men alone, and whether women in most organizations had positive/negative attitudes towards other women, especially those in “unusually senior” positions. We therefore sought the opinion, perception and attitude of male managers to women executives.
and those of female managers to themselves. The results are contained in Tables 4.4 and 4.5.

**Table 4.4: Attitude of male managers towards female executives**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biased</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indifferent</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled from Field Survey, 2014.

- Table 4.4 shows that 50% of male executives were supportive of women’s role in management, 30% were biased towards them while 20% were indifferent. This goes to show that male executives are not biased against female executives and would support them whenever they have the opportunity to do so.

**Table 4.5: Attitude of female managers towards themselves**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biased</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indifferent</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled from Field Survey, 2014.

- Table 4.5 shows that just like men, attitude of women executives towards themselves was supportive (58%); 22% were biased towards themselves while 20% were indifferent.

The possible source of male managers’ bias towards their female colleagues may lie in the sex stereotyping of management as an occupation that requires masculine characteristics, which some people thought women did not have.
possess. Attempts were made to probe into the causes of the unfriendly disposition towards women executives and one male manager said he could not imagine himself taking directives from women managers when the Holy Books prescribe that women should subordinate themselves to the authority of men. There is also the belief shared by male managers that women were not emotionally equipped for managerial jobs because of their nature; women are considered fragile and temperamental.

Furthermore, the attitude of men towards women managers can also be examined from the traditional context. Traditionally, men are the heads of their respective families; they make decisions and women merely implement. But in this case, women managers reverse this role or share the position of head with men. Men see this role reversal as an affront to their masculinity; they think it runs counter to tradition. This, perhaps, helps to explain the unfriendly disposition towards women managers.

From the foregoing, therefore, women have traditionally been considered by the society to be inferior, unintelligent and therefore not worth educating. What then are the characteristics of Nigerian female executives? Do they conform to the traditionally held or new opinions about women?

Results of analysis of data collected on the demographic characteristics of Nigerian female executives are contained in Tables 4.6, 4.7 & 4.8.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.6: Age distribution of female respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (in years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 &amp; above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Compiled from Field Survey, 2014.*

Table 4.6 gives a representation of the age distribution of the respondents. From the table, we can observe that majority of the Respondents fall within the age bracket of 25-34 (40%) while 28% of the respondents were between 35-44 years. About 32% of them were aged between 45
and above. What this portends is that majority of the respondents are middle aged, that is, they are still in their prime and that is the period that people are most energetic.

**Table 4.7: Marital Status of Female Respondents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Compiled from Field Survey, 2014.*

Table 4.7 shows that 38% of the Respondents were single, while 50% of them were currently married. For those of them that were married, analysis of their responses to our probing indicated that their role as managers had not conflicted in any form with their role as mothers, 61% had been married at one point in time or the other. Some of them said they had not experienced any problem of role conflict because they had husbands who understand the mood of women. Some of them said that was the only way by which they could achieve economic autonomy thereby contributing to the upkeep of the house and the rearing of the children.

**Table 4.8: Educational Background of Female Respondents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Attainment</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HND</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Sc. MBA, M.Sc. Ph.D</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICAN, CIBN, ACII</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Compiled from Field Survey, 2014.*
Table 4.8 above examines the distribution of our respondents by their educational background. The results of our analysis concerning educational, intellectual, development and skill acquisition of Nigerian women executives show that 64% of these female managers had at least University education, 20% had intermediate level of manpower training obtainable in the Nigerian polytechnics while 16% had professional qualifications such as ICAN, CIBN, CIPM, ICSAN etc. The implication of this is that most of the female respondents are highly educated and are capable of the intellectual demands of managing organisations.

Table 4.9: Managerial Positions of Females in Organization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Management</th>
<th>Number of persons</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C.E.O’s</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Managers</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-Level Managers</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled from Field Survey, 2014.

Table 4.9 above shows the managerial positions occupied by Nigerian women, 24% were chief executives, 28% were in senior management positions, while 48% belonged to middle level managerial positions. This shows that majority of the females occupy middle level managerial positions, rather than top managerial positions, corroborating the fact that most women do not get to the top in most Organisations.

Summary of Findings
The analysis shows that although there is little or no difference among the traits, abilities, education and motivation of managerial and professional men and women, few female executives get to senior and top management positions. Secondly, the study found that Nigerian women managers are young, highly educated, witty and with a modern outlook but their full potentials have not been fully realized because they are seriously constrained by limited access to productive resources. Finally, Nigerian
female executives of today suffer from lack of power; this appears to be the most serious problem facing Nigerian women today.

Again, the findings on the attitude of the male executives to their female counterparts were discovered to stem from the traditional belief about women. Men have been alleged not to like the idea of working with women but hide under the guise of brotherly consult. Men do not feel comfortable working with women. This theme is identified through comments that refer to how men are unsure of how to act around women or how they don’t want to be around women, even ignoring them. Additionally, about 10% of the respondents expressed that they felt awkward in the workplace when dealing with women.

The findings of this study support the viewpoint that few women executives reach the very top, as only 24% of our respondents attained top-level chief executive positions.

The existence of a male managerial model has been established by a number of investigators - Adler & Izraeli (1994) confirm that it is the male and not the female sex role stereotypes that coincide with the managerial model which is one of independence, task orientation, aggressiveness etc. This study did not confirm the male managerial role model but instead found that the characteristics referred to by these researchers as cited above are not the monopoly of male executives. The study found that they are common to both male and female executives in approximately the same proportion. The study rather found that a competence cluster, which includes attributes such as problem solving and decision making abilities are also important qualities of Nigerian women executives.

Furthermore, it was discovered that the warmth experience cluster is rather completely ascribed to the female population. This, in addition to the issues raised above, help in invalidating the male managerial model in the Nigerian environment. Another interesting finding of this study is that a far greater number of women candidates for executive positions exist today than were true a decade ago. The reasons for this include:

- Greater opportunities arising from an unprecedented growth in the services sector where women are dominant.
- Higher motivation. Women do not have careers, they have jobs. But with each passing year, more members of the female workforce are
sharing the aspiration for career development and success that have traditionally characterized male managers.

- Greater educational attainment historically: The more highly educated a woman is, the more likely it is that she would work. Today, a preponderant proportion of Nigerian women are educated and are therefore more eager to avail themselves of the advantages of the labour market rather than limit themselves to the home perpetually.

- Rising acceptance of working women: Since everybody recognizes and accepts the slogan “equality before the law”. Added to this is the heightened aspiration of women. Both the female employees and their organizations have reasons to break the characteristic polarization of the workplace into segregated sex occupations. Also this change is due to the assumption of more powerful positions by young managers who are more liberal and are now well disposed to accepting women in non-traditional roles.

V. Policy Recommendations

- Strategies to facilitate women’s progression to management and executive positions require high-level commitment to change the existing culture within a firm or organization. Sensitization programmes at all levels of the hierarchy should be geared to refuting the myths surrounding women’s capabilities and dedication to work, improving managers’ understanding of gender and family issues, and endorsing the valuable contribution women can make to an organization’s image and to its productivity.

- In order to compete at par with men, it is also essential that women have access to management training and line experience, mentors and role models at the highest levels, as well as admittance to formal and informal networks and channels of communication at work.

- Integrated and sustained efforts also need to be made to ensure that components of equal employment opportunity policies (including recruitment, job assignment, career planning, grading, wages, transfer and promotion) are closely monitored and that the procedures are transparent, objective and fair.

- Change in the attitude of men or male chauvinism toward women executives.
• Family-friendly policies; more inventive elements can be added to ensure that women are not penalized financially for motherhood, such as the elimination of retirement plan, forfeitures for career breaks, the provision of unpaid leave of absence with a guarantee of a job on return to work, and the promotion of women who work part-time.

• Eliminating sex-stereotyped images of women and men and sexist language from school curricula (teaching materials and teaching methods) so that women’s equal participation in all areas of society is instilled into children’s consciousness from an early age.

VI. Conclusion
From the findings of this study, some explanations given for the under representation of women in administration is that women themselves are the cause. It has been said that women are sometimes reluctant to run for public offices, are not assertive, do not want power, or are unwilling to play the game. They also tend to see other women as threats, leaving successful women unsupported in confronting discrimination, sexism, racism, and the ‘old boys’ network. For women to develop the confidence to take up leadership there is need for support from other women. Having role models and mentors is a useful support structure for women. Mentors can have a critical effect on the career paths of women who aspire to advance in higher education and administration. It will help women to deal with the barriers and obstacles at the work place. It will in addition help to develop self-esteem, aggressive managerial personalities, and overall skills to nurture future leaders, but then women must avail themselves for mentorship. Networking is also important, and can take the place of the “old boys club” that men have formed. Networking, role models, and mentors allow women to get advice, moral support and contacts for information.

Women in managerial positions should not be shy to project feminine traits such as being caring, empathetic, trusting, sharing, and empowering. Women should acknowledge these traits as strengths and not weaknesses. It is possible that a persistent display of such values can make them “core values” that will be embraced in future organizations as the normal culture. Women have to learn to be comfortable in leadership, and just run with it and make a positive difference.
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