

Individual Barriers to Women's Ascension to CEO Positions in Kenya

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Abstract: Individual barriers exist in the person, either through their own experiences, exposure, values and preferences or may be imposed by others through their prejudices, biases and perceived differences. They affect the person's attitude and confidence levels, which in turn affects how they behave in the workplace, or how they are perceived in terms of leadership abilities. Many individuals do not recognize when their own abilities are hampered by their personal biases and prejudices stifle their career progression, or create biases that they impose on those they are managing, supervising or mentoring. Given the low numbers of women at CEO level, it is likely that there are barriers at an individual that may be contributing to this. A lack of appreciation of the root causes may continue to hamper women's ascension to CEO or equivalent positions. The general objective of the study was to determine if individual barriers influence women's ascension to CEO positions in Kenya's largest corporations. The methodology was based on a feminism philosophical framework, and comprised of a correlational research design. The population of the study were 432 women executives from Kenya's top 50 corporations. Primary data collection of both a quantitative and qualitative nature, was carried out using a self-developed self-administered questionnaire that explored the life history of the participants. A sample size of 124 was targeted and selected using simple random sampling. Descriptive statistics and regression analysis was used to analyse the data.

Keywords: Attitude, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Confidence, Double Burden, Individual Barriers, Kenya, Professional Differences, Women's Ascension.

I. INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, it seems that the leadership positions have been primarily filled by men given the statistics (Catalyst, 2015). However, there is an acknowledgement by some corporations and organizations that there is a shortage of good talent, more so at leadership level. As such, these organizations must exploit all avenues to find the right leader.

The on-going war for leadership talent is a demonstration of how difficult it has become to attract and retain good caliber of people; and this is perhaps even more difficult at leadership levels where the type of relevant experience is very limited (Sandberg, 2013). The proportion of women in leadership positions continues to remain low or registers only marginal increments as they seem to face insurmountable barriers compared to those their male counterparts face (Groysberg & Bell, 2013).

With this background, it is safe to presume that there is a low number of women in leadership, and decision making positions as compared to men in corporate Kenya, as it is in many countries, as well as at a global level, in corporate organizations. This is termed as the Glass Ceiling Effect, which refers to barriers women face in ascending within the workplace, and is observed across several countries, societies, continents, and companies, no matter where one searches (Huse & Solberg, 2006). Given the low numbers of women at CEO level, a lack of appreciation of the root causes may continue to hamper women's ascension to CEO or equivalent positions. Few studies have been conducted specifically to

understand the challenges of women's seemingly limited ascension to CEO positions. This study adds to the knowledge gap in understanding the barriers that women face at senior management levels.

The general objective of this study was to determine the extent to which individual barriers influence women's ascension to CEO positions in corporations in Kenya. The specific objectives were to determine to what extent: attitude influences women's ascension to CEO position; confidence influences women's ascension to CEO position; professional differences influences women's ascension to CEO position; and if double burden influences women's ascension to CEO position.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In many countries the number of women in leadership positions continues to remain low and suggests that women seem to face insurmountable barriers compared to those of their male counterparts (Groysberg & Bell, 2013). One author argues that the marginalization of women in leadership is an 'unjustifiable luxury' no longer affordable in Africa as a continent largely and continuously struggling for an economic breakthrough (Samkange & Dingani, 2013) while others assess the potential impact women's contribution can have in multiple facets including social, health and even politics (World Economic Forum, 2015; Silverstein & Sayre, 2009).

On the other hand, there has been very positive progress globally, on gender leadership, with Norway leading with mandatory female representation at 35% for non-executive women directors at Board level (Daily & Dalton, 2003). A study of the United Kingdom's Financial Times Stock Exchange (FTSE) 100 companies revealed that over a 12 year period the percentage of women on boards increased from 6.7% to 12.5%, and that women constituted only 3% of CEOs in 2009 (Helburn & Cheung, 2010); however great strides have been made since then with women on boards registering 23.5% in 2015, but only had 5% women CEOs (Cranfield University, 2015). In the US, 20 companies or 4% of the Fortune 500 companies only had a woman CEO in 2012, which climbed to 22 companies in 2015, and only 16.6% of board members are female for the same category of companies (Catalyst, 2015). This suggests therefore, that the pace at which women are being assimilated into corporate leadership is extremely slow (Groysberg & Bell, 2013). Of the top 200 companies across Africa only 2.5 % CEOs are women, moreover, all are from either Nigeria or South Africa.

In Kenya the gender balance situation is fairly similar to those described above. A study conducted by the Kenya Institute of Management (2010), revealed that the same discriminatory practices may be at play in the Kenyan scenario. Among the state corporations in Kenya in 2012, board composition was only 20% women and 80% men, while in companies listed on the Nairobi Stock Exchange, only 12% of the board members are female (Kenya Institute of Management, 2012). Yet women in Kenyan make up 52% of the workforce, according to the latest population census conducted in 2009 (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2013). A recent study on gender parity in the corporate world conducted by the Federation of Kenyan Employers (2014) confirmed the existence of the Glass Ceiling, which is depriving corporations in Kenya from realizing the benefits of gender inclusion in corporate positions.

The fight against the Glass Ceiling Effect is being held back, in part, by lack of evidence and information (Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2012). Ignorance of the dimensions and character of the factors of the Glass Ceiling effect means interventions proposed to prepare organizations to develop policies and programs to enable high female talent ascend to corporate positions might be ill informed, inadequate, inappropriate, or even poorly sequenced. It is for this reason that the researcher was interested in investigating how individual barriers of the Glass Ceiling Effect influence the ascension of women to CEO positions in the leading corporations in Kenya.

A.1 Individual Barriers to Women's Ascension to CEO Position:

Individual barriers exist in the person, and affect one's attitudes, confidence, performance and abilities. They are primarily reflected in the choices one makes at an individual level either by the individual themselves or by other persons, or bodies of influence, on their behalf. The choices commence early in life, for example, with parental division of labour being the first determinant of role occupancy later in life, as this endorses gender-stereotypical beliefs, and thus creates an expectation in the individual's pursuit of career goals thereafter (Avolio, Rotundo, & Walumbwa, 2009). Thereafter, experiences in childhood shape behaviours and attitudes, and impact ones approach to decision making, risk appetite, and leadership abilities.

For example, in many Western societies, children are brought up to approach risks in a different way depending on their gender, resulting in more confident males with higher self-esteem, than girls, reinforce the goals (Fitzsimmons, Callan, & Paulsen, 2013). Similarly in African societies, culture assigns women leadership roles that are secondary to those of the men, if at all ((Kabebere-Macharia, 1995). There is generally scepticism when women lead, and in many situations, gender more than age, experience or competence, determines the role one is assigned in African social settings (Kiamba, 2008). Such fears and doubts may then be internalized by both genders – with men doubting the women's leadership abilities, and women doubting their own leadership competencies (De la Ray, 2005).

Individual barriers often result in women choosing consciously or subconsciously not to participate or present themselves for CEO positions either permanently or even in a temporary or acting capacity (Trinidad & Normore, 2005). They may reject the offers overtly or subtly, and many do so unknowingly by the way they act or present themselves (Slaughter, 2012). Many women eventually exit from the corporate rat race and opt to work in smaller organisations, move to academia or start their own businesses. Others choose to remain at middle management level (Cross, 2010). This could then hamper their ability to ascend to CEO position.

A.1.1 Ascension to CEO Position:

The CEO position generally represents that apex of leadership in corporate organizations although leadership exists at many levels within organizations (Aroaz, 2007). The CEO position is usually the highest ranking official in an organization (Scouler, 2011) and usually has the highest level of decision making authority within the organization, and is often in a position to influence others promotion or pay (Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2012). The position holder is usually given credit to be the most influential individual in an organization in achieving its goals even though it is acknowledged that it takes a whole team or organisation to do so (Bennis, Canfield & Kousez, 2009). Women CEOs should therefore have the same level of authority, earn the same in terms of pay and have equal opportunities as their male counterparts to influence the promotion of others (Patel & Buiting, 2013). Women are more likely to be promoted to CEO position in a troubled organisation in effect setting them up for failure (Bruckmuller, Ryan, Rink & Haslam 2014; Rink, Ryan & Stoker, 2013).

A.1.2 Attitude:

In the corporate world, women seemingly create barriers for themselves by the choices they make, decisions they take and even how they behave, by failing to respond clearly. The attitude within and around the individual can influence their thinking and thus the choices they make. A common reaction for anyone faced with a situation where there are barriers is to avoid the barriers rather than try to face them directly, if the option exists. Women may opt out of the 'rat race' which includes ascension to CEO (Buckalew et al, 2012), and when presented with an option that either favours family or work and not both, women tend to opt for family related factors more so than their male counterparts (Sandberg, 2013). Existing prejudices against and negative attitudes towards female leaders make it harder for them to be seen as effective leaders or recognized as such, even when they excel at it (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

A.1.3 Confidence:

The association of confidence with leadership goes back in history and many early leaders were chosen on the basis of the confidence they exuded (Achua & Lussier, 2013). Early leadership theories often listed confidence as a key characteristic, and many thereafter consider it a positive trait to possess (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Women are socialized from an early age to behave in certain ways that do not lend themselves well in demonstrating confidence, and can make them look incompetent as leaders, as they have therefore learned to be less aggressive and in some cases submissive, and not appear to be confident (Applebaum, Audet, & Miller, 2003). This may then be misread to mean that the women lack ability to contribute, yet when volunteered to respond, they provide responses that demonstrate equal if not superior levels of understanding in most cases (Slaughter, 2012).

Confidence to voice career aspirations is another way that one can demonstrate an interest in the top leadership. Generally, men are able to do this a lot more comfortably than their female colleagues are able to, perhaps as a result of societal expectations and cultural values. Confidence and visibility often go hand in hand, and generally, women tend to have low visibility in organisations relative to men regardless of their positions. (Linge, Van Rensburg, & Sikalieh, 2010).

A.1.4 Gender Based Professional Differences:

Differences in how men and women handle professional situations and challenges have been the subject of extensive studies in management and behavioural science studies (Andersen, 2011). Women tend to respond differently to risk from men because they perceive risk differently (Bogan, Just, & Checkitan, 2013). In investment related decision making, women were found to be more risk averse for abstract gains, and generally tend to invest less in risky assets (Weber, Blais, & Betz, 2002). One study reports that they review probability differently and when confronted with uncertainty, women tend to express fear, while men tend to express anger and even attributed this to the existence of the hormone testosterone which was related to higher risk taking (Sapienza, Zingales, & Maestripieri, 2009). This is a critical difference as it tends to dictate what one does or what decisions they make about a situation (Bogan, Just, & Checkitan, 2013) and results in different outcomes in terms of organisational performance. Cunningham and Roberts (2012) argue that men and women differ in their impulsive base reaction, where men are more likely to respond through action, while women respond through feeling (Cunningham & Roberts, 2012).

The professional differences can also be extended to how women assimilate information, whom they choose to share it with before making final decisions. Women tend to be more inclusive in their deliberations and would consult extensively before making decisions while men are seen to be more direct (Andersen, 2011). Women also tend to be less direct in their communication about their own ambitions, plans and aspirations and are more likely to articulate this for their team.

A.1.5 Double Burden:

The double burden refers to the additional responsibilities one has over and above work related responsibilities and includes domestic, societal, religious or community based burdens, and puts pressure on the time available for work related activities including investments in developing skills, networking, and socializing. Many studies have attributed the double burden to be the biggest contributor to the Glass Ceiling Effect and directly influences the low numbers of women in management as a whole (April & Blasse, 2007; Kirai, 2013; Avolio, Rotundo, & Walumbwa, 2009; Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2012; Burri & Prechal, 2014; Kirai & Kobia, 2012).

This results in many more women leaving the workforce at middle to senior manager positions, at a faster rate than their male colleagues for family considerations, including taking time off for child birth, and therefore not available to be considered as part of the leadership pipeline (Catalyst, 2013). Even if they do return to work after they have children, they tend to select less demanding roles or jobs so as to accommodate family responsibilities in their lives in a way that hampers their progress (McKinsey, 2013). This barrier goes some way to explain why the leadership pipeline to CEO is skewed to the males, especially if child care arrangements are difficult to delegate, costly or heavily regulated (Mathur-Helm, 2005).

III. BODY OF ARTICLE

B.1 METHODOLOGY:

The methodology was based on a feminism philosophical framework, and comprised of a correlational research design. The population of the study were 432 women executives from Kenya's top 50 corporations. Primary data collection of a quantitative nature, was carried out using a self-developed self-administered questionnaire that explored the life history of the participants. A sample size of 124 was targeted and selected using simple random sampling.

Regression analysis was used to determine the relationship between the independent and dependent variables, and in particular, establish whether individual barriers as the predictor variable influenced the outcome variable, ascension to CEO position. The population consisted of 432 women executives women from Kenya's 50 largest corporations by turnover and. A sample size of 124 was computed, and simple random sampling used to select participants. Primary data was collected via a self-administered questionnaire that was used to explore the life history of the participants. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) tool was used to analyse the data. The results are presented in form of tables.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine which individual barriers influence women’s ascension to the CEO positions in selected corporations in Kenya. In doing so, the researcher tested the extent to which individual barriers influenced women’s ascension to CEO positions.

C.1 Demographic Information:

A brief demographic profile of the study sample as a precursor to the inferential analyses is provided. This information includes position within the organization and management tenure of the respondents.

C.1.1 Management Tenure of Respondents:

It would be reasonable to expect that the length of time spent in management would reflect the level of seniority that is attained. In as far as the management tenure is concerned, the highest proportion of respondents had worked for between 16 and 20 years (n=42; 38%) at management level, as Table 1 indicates. The proportion of respondents who had worked for between 10-15 years at managerial level followed with 24% and those who had worked for between 1-5 years at (n=24; 22%). The fourth largest cohort belonged to respondents who had worked for more than twenty (n=18; 16%).

Table.I: Management Tenure of Respondents

Management Tenure of Respondents	Frequency	Percent
5-10 years	24	22%
11-15 years	27	24%
16-20 years	42	38%
21 years or more	18	16%
Total	111	100%

Source Author (2016)

The respondents were extremely well educated with an extremely small proportion (2%) that did not hold a degree of some sort. The rest of the respondents (98%), hold at least one university degree and 68% hold a Master’s Degree. Clearly the women had invested quite heavily in education; yet only 13% had attained the top leadership CEO, COO or GM positions.

The majority of respondents (72.2%) had taken maternity leave during their managerial years. Given that maternity leave only affects women, and that the majority of the women had taken maternity leave, this demonstrates how maternity leave can be a disadvantage to ascension to CEO positions compared to their male counterparts being considered for the same positions.

C.1.2 Regression Analysis:

Multiple regression was used to test the effect of individual barriers on women’s ascension to CEO position. Individual barriers were regressed on 4 dimensions of the individual barriers variable, these being attitude, confidence, professional differences and double burden. The results are indicated in Table II.

Table.II: Effect of Individual Barriers on Women’s Ascension to CEO Position

Model Summary						
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate		
1	.587 ^a	.345	.329	2.45025		

ANOVA						
Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
1 Regression	132.821	1	132.821	22.123	.000 ^b	
1 Residual	252.156	42	6.004			
Total	384.977	43				

Model	Coefficients				T	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	Tolerance			VIF	
	B	Std. Error	Beta					
1 (Constant)	12.458	.574		21.716	.000			
Professional Differences	.459	.098	.587	4.704	.000	1.000	1.000	

Model	Excluded Variables					Collinearity Statistics		
	Beta In	t	Sig.	Partial Correlation	Tolerance	VIF	Minimum Tolerance	
	1 Attitude	.228 ^b	1.828	.075	.275	.950	1.052	.950
Confidence	.237 ^b	1.816	.077	.273	.869	1.151	.869	
Double Burden	.135 ^b	1.033	.308	.159	.906	1.103	.906	

Source Author (2016)

The results of the regression indicated that one predictor explained 34.5% of the variance ($R^2=.345$, $F(1,43) = 22.123$, $p<.001$). It was found that professional differences significantly predicted women’s ascension to the CEO position ($\beta = .459$, $p<.001$). The ANOVA results show that the effect of the dimension professional differences is statistically significant ($F=22,123$, $p<.001$). The study found that individual barriers had a significant influence on ascension to CEO position. This supports the findings of Cross (2010) who holds that women prefer to remain in middle management, and Tlais & Kauser (2011) who states that individual barriers are a significant impediment to women’s ascension in organisations.

The study found that attitude did not have a significant influence on women’s ascension to CEO position, which supports Sandberg (2013), who holds that women who portray a positive attitude are likely to ascend to leadership. This also supports the doctoral study by Heath (2013) that concluded that women are more likely to be successful in careers if their career is meaningful and fulfilling to them which then affects both work ethic and attitude.

Similarly, the study found that confidence did not have a significant influence on women’s ascension to CEO position, which is contrary to Applebaum, Audet, & Miller (2003), who holds that womens display of confidence can be detrimental to their career progression. The respondents were confident in their abilities to lead, but did not articulate their desires to ascend to CEO position explicitly in their plans or to their superiors. It is however in support of a KPMG study which found that confidence and connections are two significant factors that can make or break a womens areer and help them ascend to top leadership if both are positive (KPMG, 2015).

The study also found that double burden did not have a significant influence on women’s ascension to CEO position. This is contrary to the observations of Barreto, Ryan & Schmitt (2012), who considered double burden likely to be the biggest impediment. The women in Kenya were able to rely on family support, and seemingly have more flexible domestic arrangements than working women in societies where it is rigid which is similar to proposals made by Ramya (2014) for achieving work life balance. They were able to make use of technology, the support from their domestic and family networks, to attain greater work life balance.

V. CONCLUSION

Overall, the individual barriers were found to have a significant influence on the ascension of women to CEO position. The study concludes that professional differences were shown to influence ascension to CEO significantly, and so women must consider the manner in which they deal with matters relating to leadership such as risk taking, making presentations and report writing, and critical decision making. At the same time, the dimensions of attitude, confidence and double burden were found not to have had a significant influence on women’s ascension to CEO positions in Kenya; but should not be ignored as other studies have found them to be important. Furthermore dimensions like attitude and confidence ca

Based on the findings and conclusion, the study recommends that individuals and the institutions they work for, must appreciate that there are significant gender based differences in how women handle professional matters such as in areas

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of strategy development, crises and risk management, crises management, and develop appropriate strategies to address the gaps depending on what the specific role the women hold requires and what skills are required. Women also need to consciously apply skills that may not come naturally; and must be prepared to step out of their comfort zones.

Individuals need to realistically understand the truth regarding their personal traits and skills that may be a shortcoming in the work environment. Various tools and techniques can be applied. For example, use of executive coaches using cognitive-behavioural solution focused approach can help increase self-awareness and personal insights, improve self-confidence, build management skills and help the participants deal with changing demands that come with organisational change as demonstrated by Grant, Curtayne & Burton (2009). The women should also seek to gain experience in areas they are less comfortable dealing with by volunteering for challenging roles or to step into situations that would enable them to demonstrate their leadership skills.

By identifying contextual factors that could increase women's mobility in the Kenyan corporate environment, this paper makes an important contribution to women executives and also to organisations that hire them. This paper provides a basis for dialogue between institutions and individuals. The paper also contributes to gender leadership studies in African corporations. Moreover, it is looking at the issue of ascension at senior levels which adds to empirical studies that were focused on women's career progression at lower to middle level ranks.

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