



The paradox of Gender Gap in Corporate Leadership: The Ghanaian perspective.

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Abstract

In recent times, women have been found to be making inroads into the higher levels of leadership, while making impressive contributions in corporate leadership performance. However, despite an increased numbers of women found in the global labour market, there is a significant gap in gender leadership. Various efforts made over the past decades to achieve gender balance in organizational leadership have been slow-paced. To address this phenomenon, the study reviewed gender role theory, and cultural beliefs and socialization as the theoretical framework of the study. The purpose of this study was to investigate the reasons accounting for the gender gap in leadership positions within the corporate world. To achieve this purpose, a hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used to gather lived-experiences of 10 female bankers in Ghana. With the use of NVivo 10, qualitative software, the data gathered was analyzed to reveal personal and external factors accounting for the gender gap in leadership. The study recommended support to break through the ceiling of societal expectations on gender roles, while developing a well thought-out plan for personal development, to achieve the vision of gender parity in corporate leadership.

Keywords: career progression, gender, leadership, parity, personality, progression

Introduction/Background to the Study

The subject of gender gap in leadership has attracted increasing attention globally over the past few decades. Women are considered as grossly underrepresented in the higher echelons of professional and leadership in the corporate world (Sheerin, 2012). Academic literature on gender and corporate leadership has revealed that, women have historically tended to be substantially underrepresented in a range of areas in corporate leadership (McDonald & Westphal, 2013). Notably, women in the sub-Saharan African region are perceived to be largely invisible in the corporate corridors of power. Increasingly, it has been revealed that, women are mostly considered and employed for front-line office roles, and are usually associated with low-skilled and low-wage workers who work in precarious working environment (Dewi & Rachmawati, 2014; Sheerin, 2012).

Research have revealed that gender equality is a factor of better performance for top leadership teams in the market place, and a significant element for national development (Dewi & Rachmawati, 2014; Ely, Ibarra & Kolb, 2011; Sheerin, 2012). However, Sheerin (2012) observed that important differences exist in the various occupations men and women occupy in the global labor market. Globally, women account for about half of the population; it is therefore evocative that a balanced use of human resource in the leadership space will support the drive towards attaining a nation's full potential in developmental goals (Ganguli, et al., 2014; Jackson, 2009). Women constitute a small percentage in senior management positions as compared to their male counterparts. The percentage of women in senior positions globally, ranges from 3 to 12%; however, that of men in senior management positions is relatively stable across regions (Jackson, 2009).

Ghana, a developing country shares a similar perspective, with an estimate of 39 percent of women in the labor force occupying the middle and senior ranks of management positions

within both formal and informal sectors of employment in 2010 (International Labour Organization, 2015). Specifically, a total of 2.5 percent and 4.1 percent of women in the Ghanaian labour force were respectively found in managerial and professional roles within the formal employment sector in 2010 (Ghana Statistical Services, 2012). Arguably, these percentages reveal the huge gap in gender leadership in the workforce. Considering the immense contribution gender equality gives to leadership performance and national development, one could only wonder why, Ghana, a developing country, in the sub-Saharan Africa, continually experience a dearth in gender balance within the ranks of higher decision making bodies.

Although many efforts have been made by some international treaties, governmental and organizational bodies to bridge the gap in gender leadership, the progress has been slow-paced, and women continue to be shut out of higher levels of economic and corporate decision-making bodies (Ely, Ibarra & Kolb, 2011; International Labour Organization, 2015; World Bank Reports, 2013). Therefore, this study used qualitative methodology that seeks to elicit an individual personal experience, feelings, and perceptions to investigate the subject of gender inequality in corporate leadership in Ghana.

Methodology

The methodology selected for the study is a qualitative one, specifically, a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. The study used primary and secondary data for the analysis of the factors accounting for gender gap in leadership positions in Ghana. Through a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, primary data was obtained through face-to-face interview sessions from ten female leaders in the corporate sector, specifically the banks. The participants of this study were women in senior-levels and middle-levels of leadership, with homogeneous characteristic. The data collected through the interviews were captured and transcribed verbatim onto a Microsoft word. The data was subsequently loaded onto computer-generated qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 10 to search for, and established commonalities, themes, and related threads for detailed analysis.

The choice of the qualitative methodology was to explore and to understand the factors precluding career women from rising into leadership positions in the corporate world. Thus, in understanding the phenomenon under study, multiple perspectives of individual women who have had experiences in the rise to senior leadership roles were explored to acquire knowledge on the phenomenon under study (Ballad & Balawan, 2012; Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002).

Literature Review

At the heart of achieving gender equality in almost all areas of society is the education of girls and women for career opportunities and advancement (Jackson, 2009). The availability and equal accessibility of formal education is an initiative expected to achieve effective balance in the use of human resources to ensure economic development and extremism (Ganguli, et al., 2014; Ghana Statistical Services, 2012; Jackson, 2009). Remarkably, both developed and developing countries, including Ghana, have made substantial progress in educating women over the past few decades (Jackson, 2009).

However, despite governments' huge investments, and many other efforts geared towards placing women on equal footing with their male counterparts, it is perceived that the direct engagement of women in decision-making positions is relatively low (Ganguli, Hausmann & Viarengo., 2014; Ghana Statistical Services, 2012; Jackson, 2009). In the light of the above arguments, it is suggestive that focusing on education alone is not enough to get women into the

higher echelons of leadership. The study reviewed society's perspective on gender role with regards to cultural orientations and socialization, and their effect on career progression of women into higher leadership roles.

Gender Role Theory

Gender role is the expectations of a society about the proper behaviours for males or females (Eagly, 2013; Kerr & Multon, 2015). Under the gender role theory, men are expected to possess agentic qualities that are perceived to be congruent with a leader's role, whereas women are expected to possess communal qualities that are incongruent with a leader's role (Carli, 2010; Eagly, 2013; Ely, Ibarra & Kolb, 2011; Lanaj & Hollenbeck, 2015). These expectations automatically activate stereotypical expectations that favour men over women for leadership position in society (Carli, 2010; Lanaj & Hollenbeck, 2015). Thus, regardless of one's level of educational attainment, knowledge, and skill acquisition, women are restrained from accessing leadership roles largely based on societal expectations.

Studies on gender roles reveal that women are generally not viewed as good "fit" for leadership positions (Ely, Ibarra & Kolb, 2011). However, to effectively fit into the mold of leadership, women are expected to work harder in developing and displaying the 'so-called' agentic qualities while being warm and communal as per societal expectation (Lyness & Heilman, 2006). This places women into a situation known as double bind, subjecting them into double standard and various forms of biases (Ely, Ibarra & Kolb, 2011; Livingston, 2013). This situation deters and frustrates women from aspiring to rise into leadership roles at the workplace. Other studies suggest that cultural beliefs and socializations under the lens of gender role theory are related factors accounting for the low presence of women in leadership (Kambi, 2008; Kerr & Multon, 2015; Sheerin, 2012; Ward & Kiruswa, 2013).

Culture Beliefs and Orientation

Culture can be thought of as the foundation of the social order within the society people live in and the rules abided by (Schein, 2010). According to Schein (2010), culture is perceived as dynamic and coercive background structure that influences individuals in multiple ways within a given society, organization, or occupation. The concept of culture is perceived as pervasive, and influences all aspect of one's personality; culture helps to explain phenomena that seem irrational but hard to change (Schein, 2010). Through socialization, entrenched cultural beliefs and practices are unwittingly engrained into one's psyche and communicated to all, that women are ill-suited for leadership roles (Ely, Ibarra & Kolb; 2011).

These cultural beliefs and practices activate stereotypical expectations that influence judgments; and activate second-generational forms of gender-biases, that in aggregate impede the progress of women's journey towards senior leadership (Jackson, 2012; World Development Report, 2012). Ely et al (2011) describe second-generation form of gender bias as a subtle and powerful, yet often invisible barrier arising from cultural beliefs about gender, as well as workplace structures, practices, and patterns of interaction that inadvertently favour men. In Ghana, the traditional and cultural expectations espoused through deep-rooted social norms dictates the roles acceptable to men and women (Chichester, Pleuss, Lee & Taylor, 2017).

The cultural perception that 'man is the head of the house' and have the 'singular honour to make most decisions' is largely one of the key reasons why women in the sub-Saharan African countries including Ghana, tend to be found at the lower levels in the society (Fraser, et al., 2012; Ward & Kiruswa, 2013). These cultural norms cripple women even at the workplace, affecting

their ability to match the male counterpart booth for booth (Chichester, Pleuss, Lee & Taylor, 2017; Eagly, 2013; Women's Manifesto in Ghana, 2004). In effect, it is an acceptable fact that cultural beliefs and its socialization under the lens of gender role theory play critical roles in the considerable gender gap in leadership positions at the workplace (Calás & Smir cich, 2009; Ely, Ibarra & Kolb, 2011; Kolb & McGinn, 2009).

Results and Discussion

The following five themes were identified as key factors playing distinctive roles in the career progression of Ghanaian women into senior leadership roles. These themes were (1) Gender Role Syndrome, (2) Double Burden, (3) Family Support, (4) Negative Work Environment, and (5) Personal Limiting Factors. Participants of this research described the challenges experienced as they progressed through their careers into senior leadership roles. Other suggestions as to the success factors were shared based on participants' personal experiences. These factors are discussed and analyzed in turns.

The Gender Role Syndrome/Effects

Almost all participants of this research shared experience relating to various forms of inhibition evolving from societal and cultural norms of the society. Participants-expressed that, sometimes women are inhibited by societal expectations of what one 'can do' and 'cannot do'. According to participants, women believe that they are to be subservient to men irrespective of place or time. Gender role prescribes expectations, which automatically activate stereotypical expectations that favour men over women for leadership position in society (Carli, 2010; Lanaj & Hollenbeck, 2015). Societal expectations engrained in the psyche of individual prejudice women and place them in contexts, which stall career progression into senior leadership roles.

In effect, participants expressed that where one has been socialized along such lines, in the home, church, and other social agencies; and believes in the ideology that the male should always have a dominant position; then career decisions for higher leadership roles will only remain a dream. Participants expressed that most women are hampered by ideologies that a woman should not speak up in public. One participant shared that women who speak up during decision making at the workplace, are tagged by others as being too assertive and aggressive. Most women are overprotective of their image and will sacrifice career prospects in this regard when they sense the possibility of being negatively stereotyped. According to study participants, societal expectations play distinctive roles in the career progression of women.

Double burden

One's inability to achieve work-life balance between commitment at home and demands at the workplace is seen as a distinct challenge facing women in their endeavour to progress towards senior leadership positions. Participants of this research revealed that, women in the corporate world, specifically, the banking sector face challenges with double burden in endeavour to balance family and workplace demands, which in effect negatively impact on career progression. The International Labour Organization (2015) described the situation of "double burden", as a situation where women are perceived as care-givers for the families and households, as well as career or business women. To be successful at both, the woman needs to be multitasked to be able to span through the hours of the day (International Labour Organization, 2015).

According to study participants, making a decision to pursue a career does not wave off a woman's traditional role of managing the home and the family. Participants expressed that

women should not be delusional about the effects of double burden when decisions are made for higher career prospects. By way of emphasis, one participant expressed that “honestly, rising up the corporate career ladder is a lot of work; and trying to be the best mum, the best wife, and the best career woman is actually a fallacy”. Taking care of one’s family is one of the most important and very demanding careers for a woman. Thus, depending on one’s priorities, most women usually make critical decision of choosing families over their careers, when given the option; ultimately, affecting career advancement into leadership positions. Participants described the situation of double burden as a deterrent for career growth into senior leadership positions.

Favourable Family Support

Participants described the critical role one’s family plays in career development. Most participants expressed that, favourable family support from husbands, older children, and extended relations is crucial for a woman’s career advancement. One of the participants mentioned that her husband was of great support; agreeing to have only one child, meant fewer interruptions by way of career breaks for maternity leaves. However, participants expressed that, in situations where women lack family support, especially from the spouses; career advancement becomes detrimental to one’s family life. A participant shared that a woman pursuing higher careers sometimes becomes “a threat to her partner, in a very subtle way”. From the participant’s perspective, this situation could lead to marital separation. Another participant shared the support she received from extended family. She clearly expressed that, “I had an incredible mother-in-law ... She just made it possible for me to become who I am today”.

Other participants shared revealing facts about traditional family roles. According to participants, until recently the traditional family role of the woman was in the ‘kitchen’. However, women are being viewed differently in today’s world. ‘Women’s voices are being heard more internationally’ Therefore the natural inhibition and society’s inclination to brand a woman as being ‘in the kitchen, or to be a child-bearing machine, is giving way. Thus, women who do not received explicit support from families; face various forms of frustrations in aspirations towards pursuing higher career roles.

Negative Work Environment

Negative work environment in some organizations, characterized by poor organizational policies and structures, and inherent bias in promotions serve as invisible barriers working against career growth of women into senior leadership. Participants gave account of impediments placed in the ways of women’s career as a matter of policy, to sort of stall career progression of women. Some participants shared experience in instances where women were denied promotion to certain leadership roles that demanded extended working hours and extensive travelling. In addition, other participants shared experiences on how women are harassed by male bosses, and discriminated against on issues of promotions because of pregnancies.

Participants of this study stated that, where management of organizations are not oriented to be ‘gender neutral’, women struggle to climb the career ladder. Schein (2010) argued that, organizational culture is created, embedded, evolved, and manipulated by leaders. Participants shared that, leadership of some corporate organizations are influenced by preconceptions about the best careers for males and females. Thus, organizational culture created based on leaders’ preconceptions could influence decisions and policies within the work environment and sometimes hamper career growth of certain groups of people including women (Schein, 2010).

Personal Limiting Factors

Given the demands of the family and work, coupled with gender roles and cultural norms, some women are unable to develop the characteristics and traits needed to drive career growth into senior leadership roles. Almost all the participants of this research expressed that, lack of the requisite personal characteristics congruent for leadership roles is viewed as a negative factor against career growth of women. Participants described poor mind set about oneself, lack of personal drive, complacency, different priorities, and lack of personal development through continuous training and education as factors inhibiting the individual from climbing higher career ladders.

Participants expressed that some women do not come up to speed when it comes to exhibiting leadership traits. Some women in the corporate world lack personal drive, the 'can do' spirit needed for critical decision making at top leadership and professional levels. Participants shared that, most women do not believe in their abilities to reach higher heights; lack self-confidence, and lack aspiration for leadership positions. Thus, lack of strategic planning for career growth on the part of women is another factor accounting for the low presence of women in the corporate leadership space.

In summary, participants of this research revealed that the corporate world is a competitive landscape, and leadership hierarchy is likened to a typical pyramid; thus women in the corporate environment are to take up higher and challenging roles to prove themselves as reliable and available for leadership responsibilities. Personal limiting factors such as one's inability to pursue appropriate personal development for higher career roles; and the inability to maintain a work/life balance through sufficient family support, are critical factors which need to be managed personally by individual women aspiring for higher leadership roles.

External factors such as societal expectations on gender roles and cultural norms, ingrained in the psyche of individuals through socializations; and negative work environment characterized with biases, discriminations, and poor organizational structures, are considered as negative factors constantly working against career progression of women in the banking sector, and the corporate world at large. Conclusively, the inability of stakeholders to manage the personal and external factors to support of higher career prospects is viewed to be the contributing factors for the gender gap in leadership.

Conclusion and Practical Recommendations

Findings from the study indicate that personal development is a necessary requirement for career progression into higher leadership roles. The research found personal factors as self-limiting factor negatively affecting one's career progression. From participants' experiences, women who have successfully made it into senior leadership had to do so much by way of developing themselves academically and professionally for specific leadership roles. In addition, women in leadership are those who are able to set out right priorities through careful planning for personal development, continuous education, and building up characteristics required for leadership roles. The study recommends that women aspiring for higher leadership roles in the corporate sector must set priorities and chose options that attract greater premiums, else career aspirations into senior leadership roles will be a mere fantasy.

Education is a given in today's corporate world, however professional training for specific roles is critical to career progression into senior leadership. Whiles there is moral pressure on organizational leadership to allow women into the leadership space; it will however be pointless to push women into that space where it appears obvious that they do not have what it takes to fit

the mold of leadership. The research therefore, recommends that women in the corporate world must strategically work towards upgrading their skills and knowledge through training for senior leadership roles (Commonwealth Secretariat; 2015; Jackson, 2009).

The research recommends women aspiring to progress into senior leadership roles must implore the help of other relations and 'trained' house-holds to support them in managing family commitment that come by day. In addition, explicit support from spouses is required on decisions to have fewer numbers of children, in order to reduce the number of times women go for maternity leave through their career (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2015). In weakening the effect of gender role syndrome at the workplace, this research recommends corporate organizations to institute mentorship programmes at the workplace to support women into developing leadership identity for career growth.

Organizations are to establish mentoring and sponsorship opportunities, and engagement in leadership or appropriate skill-development programmes that will help to harness the talent of women into successful career progression (Followell, 2014). Mentorship programmes at the workplace will give younger women protégées who would serve as role models and also help build strong self-confidence and the foundations of the identity required to cement a leader identity for career growth (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2015; Ely, Ibarra & Kolb, 2011; Followell, 2014). Closely important to mentorship is networking in the corporate world. Participants described peer networking and power networking as important pieces of the jigsaw.

The research found a stunning revelation, that in the corporate world, certain information is tacit, not written, or even spoken outwardly about, but intimately could be shared through networking and mentoring. With these initiatives, it is believed that forms of gender biases in the corporate world will give way for the pursuance of gender diversity and inclusion at all levels of corporate leadership, ensuring full use of national talent for full national development. This research presents an in-depth exploration of lived experience of women leaders who have lived through various experiences in their career progression to senior leaderships. The study findings provide opportunities for further research into the phenomenon of gender gap in leadership.

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