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Institutional Barriers to Women's Ascension to CEO Positions: A Survey of Senior Managers in Kenya

Nancy Onyango
DBA Student, Chandaria School of Business, Nairobi, Kenya
Teresiah Ling'e
Lecturer, Chandaria School of Business, Nairobi, Kenya
Damary Sikaliah
Lecturer, Chandaria School of Business, Nairobi, Kenya

Abstract:
Institutions are designed to accommodate and provide an enabling environment for employees to ascend to senior positions including the CEO position, irrespective of gender. Many organisations therefore do not recognize when the organisational structures, policies and procedures themselves, stifle the progress of the employees, more so the senior executives. 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.
The general objectives of the study was to determine if institutional barriers influence women's ascension to CEO positions in Kenya's largest corporations. The findings from this study will assist women working in Kenyan corporates, as well as the organisations themselves, identify potential and real institutional barriers that stand in the women's of their ascension, and provide a basis for them to prepare themselves adequately and find ways of overcoming the Glass Ceiling effects.
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.
Correlation analysis was used to test the strength of the relationship between the dimensions of the independent variables and regression analysis was used for the hypothesis establish whether institutional barriers as the predictor variable influenced the outcome variable, ascension to CEO position.
The findings of this study showed that the institutional barriers which were found to have a significant influence on women's ascension to CEO position were promotion criteria and professional networks, while "old boys" networks and role models having the least influence.
The study concludes and recommends that institutions need to appreciate that although their structures may be designed to be gender neutral, they may unknowingly be contributing to the Glass Ceiling effect, given the low numbers of women at CEO level.
Organisations need to take deliberate action to enable women progress evenly up the ranks, using a number of initiatives. The actions should be preceded by a thorough interrogation of the status quo to establish a baseline situational analysis, such that each organisation can diagnose the specific bottlenecks relevant to their organisation, and thus develop targeted and specific action plans. The action plans may incorporate aspects of executive coaching, deliberate nominating more women to senior leadership and other challenging positions, affirmative action and fast tracking women who show leadership potential.

Keywords: *Chief Executive Officer (CEO), women's ascension, institutional barriers, succession planning, promotion criteria, networks, Kenya*

1. Introduction

Traditionally, it seems that the leadership positions have been primarily filled by men given the statistics (Catalyst, 2004). 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 which institutional barriers influence women's ascension to the CEO position in corporations in Kenya. The specific objectives were to determine firstly, if organisational structures influence women's ascension to CEO position; secondly, if succession planning pipelines influence women's ascension to CEO position; thirdly, if promotion criteria influences women's ascension to CEO position; fourthly, whether "old boy" networks influence women's ascension to CEO position; fifthly, whether having mentors and role models influence women's ascension to CEO position; and finally, whether existence of professional networks influence women's ascension to CEO position.

2. 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 institutional barriers of the Glass Ceiling Effect influence the ascension of women to CEO positions in the leading corporations in Kenya.

2.1. Institutional Barriers to Women's Ascension to CEO Position

Institutional barriers are obstacles that are internal and systemic within an organization that intentionally or accidentally aim to maintain the status quo with males taking up more of the leadership positions. Examples include outreach and recruitment, leadership pipelines, the corporate climate that is created for these persons once recruited (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011). Researches point to women's dissatisfaction on several matters within corporate organizations around unequal pay, stagnant positions and lack of promotions, inadequate training and development and a general lack of equal opportunities in the workplace which is a key pillar in the Glass Ceiling Theory (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011; Thomas, Lewis, & Uchenna, 2014; Ng & Chow, 2009; Cross, 2010).
This study assessed the extent to which institutional barriers influence women's ascension to the CEO position in Kenyan corporates and whether the influence was significant. The research gap therefore was to determine if similar barriers apply in the Kenyan context, and indeed whether solutions exist that enable the women overcome these barriers. The overall research problem in this study was that, despite the number of women in middle management being equal or closer to that of men, the number of women reduces in positions above this level.

2.1.1. 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 (Scouller, 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).

2.1.2. Organizational Structures and Policies

The patriarchal values that form the core of most societies and therefore structures, contribute significantly to the institutional barriers that exist today(Cook & Glass, 2014). Organisation structures in place cover a multitude of areas including recruitment, development, appraisals, operations, business development and marketing, and while today, the structures are not necessarily set up to be utilized purely by one gender, if the leadership is male dominated, as is the case in many corporations, then it is more likely that the structures will be built with the male needs in mind (Martin, 2015).

A study in Kenya found that most women employees were dissatisfied with the career development programs that were on offer, and recommended that organizations should be more deliberate to ensure that their career development programs and curricula are targeted to enhance career development amongst both men and women employees and not assume that the development needs are uniform (Ali, 2011).

2.1.3. Succession Planning and Pipelines

Men and women should have equal opportunities to be considered for leadership positions including the CEO position, based on meritocracy if fair representation is to be achieved in corporations as much as in other entities (Jakobsh, 2004).Due to male dominance in the development of organizational structures, the corporate environment is a challenging and demanding environment for women, as it traditionally favoured masculine type of behaviours more, or made it easier for those that exhibit masculine behaviours get noticed. However, for women, demonstration of these character traits can be counterproductive (Sandberg, 2013).

2.1.4. Promotion Criteria and Policies

Some organizations have recruitment and promotion policies that on paper apply equally to both men and women, but in reality tended to differ from or conflict with cultural norms (Saunders, 2014). Examining statistics on who gets promoted into management and, particularly, who gets the senior management positions in any organization shows that even employers without any obvious biases, and even those with the best general employment diversity records, do not fare as well in fostering gender diversity in the upper echelons of organizational leadership (Pai & Vaidya, 2009). Alimo-Metcalfe (2010) noted that there are insidious gender biases in assessment processes in organizations including recruitment, performance evaluation and appraisal, and processes for identifying "fast-track talent" as they are informed by the existing leadership which is male dominated (Alimo-Metcalfe, 2010).

2.1.5. Old Boys Networks

Old boys' networks comprise of people who have perhaps grown up together, schooled in the same institutions, served in military and other services together or perhaps have worked together and climbed the corporate ladder together (Oakley, 2000). They then tend to promote individuals who are like them, or better still, call upon individuals within the network that they know and can trust based on prior experiences together; and since the corporate leadership is predominantly male, old boy networks formed are strong, and continue to feed or influence who gets onto the leadership pipeline (Oakley, 2000). Women are frequently not even considered for a promotion or placed in a pipeline because they are outside these networks (Bierema, 2005).

2.1.6. Mentors and Role Models

Mentors offer psychosocial support for personal and professional development, and also give career advice and coaching while sponsors actively advocate for the individuals advancement (Sexton, Arbor, Lemak, & Wainio, 2014). While there has been an increase in the number of women being mentored, the person mentoring the individuals also affects the extent to which the mentoring can assist the individual in terms of promotions. In a study conducted by Ibarra, Carter and Silva (2010) more men are mentored by CEOs who also sponsored them for promotion, while women tended to have more junior mentors who may not be as influential or have mentors outside the organization having no influence at all in their promotion.

2.1.7. Professional Networks

Professional bodies generally have enrolment requirements that are gender neutral, and can offer women an opportunity to demonstrate their leadership skills, get promoted and eventually ascend to CEO position at a professional level (Federation of Kenyan Employers, 2014). While, the need to develop networks is now generally accepted as a necessity for getting promoted up the ranks, it is common that the networking opportunities, even when gender neutral, tend to occur a time that women prefer to be with their families, especially if they have been absent during the week. As such they tend to favour men (Akpinar-Sposito, 2012). Nevertheless, women can enhance their visibility by joining professional associations, networking with clients and with influential colleagues and friends (Linge, VanRensburg, & Sikalieh, 2010).

3. 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 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.

A correlation research design was used to test the strength of the relationship between the dimensions of the independent variables; while regression analysis was used for hypothesis testing to establish whether institutional barriers as the predictor variable influenced the outcome variable, ascension to CEO position. This was a mixed study with both quantitative and qualitative cultures of inquiry used to investigate the Glass Ceiling phenomena. 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.

4. Findings and Discussion

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

4.1. 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.

4.1.1. Distribution of Respondents by Management Cadre

Table 1 shows the distribution of the respondents based on the positions they hold. The largest ratio was of respondents who were in senior management and described themselves as occupying the "other" leadership positions with 42% and was followed by respondents who were holding heads of department positions at 30%. The proportion of respondents who were general managers 10%, chief operating officers 3%, CEOs 3% and board members 5%. Respondents in the top three position, including CEOs, COOs and Board members in the group were likely to have experienced the Glass Ceiling phenomenon, as they progressed to the positions they hold currently were 13%. This distribution shows that more women are found in lower cadres of management.

Title/Position of Respondent	Frequency	Percent
1. Board Member	6	5%
2. CEO/MD	4	3%
3. Chief Operating	3	3%
4. General Manager	12	10%
5. Regional Manager	8	7%
6. Head of Department	34	30%
7. Other	48	42%
Total	**115**	**100%**

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Management Cadre
Source Author (2016)

Another aspect considered was the length of time spent by respondents at managerial level. It would be reasonable to expect that the length of time spent in management would reflect the level of seniority that is attained.

4.1.2. Distribution of Respondents by Management Tenure

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 2 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%).

Most of the respondents fall within the 3rd category of experience (11 – 20 years). This reinforces the Glass Ceiling theory in that despite having worked at management level for several years, this did not seem to translate to promotion or ascension to more senior positions.

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%**

Table 2: Management Tenure of Respondents
Source Author (2016)

4.2. Regression Analysis

It was hypothesized that institutional barriers had significant influence on women's ascension to CEO positions. Multiple regression was used to test the effect of institutional barriers on women's ascension to CEO position. Institutional barriers were regressed on 6 dimensions these being the constructs of the institutional barriers variable. The results are indicated in Table 3.

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.411[a]	.169	.161	2.44789
2	.456[b]	.208	.191	2.40276

ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	119.518	1	119.518	19.946	.000[b]
	Residual	587.232	98	5.992		
	Total	706.750	99			
2	Regression	146.744	2	73.372	12.709	.000[c]
	Residual	560.006	97	5.773		
	Total	706.750	99			

Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	9.493	1.115		8.516	.000		
	Promotion Criteria	.183	.041	.411	4.466	.000	1.000	1.000
2	(Constant)	8.228	1.240		6.638	.000		
	Promotion Criteria	.174	.040	.391	4.297	.000	.989	1.011
	Professional Networks	.416	.191	.197	2.172	.032	.989	1.011

Excluded Variables

Model		Beta In	t	Sig.	Partial Correlation	Collinearity Statistics		
						Tolerance	VIF	Minimum Tolerance
1	Organizational Structures	-.052[b]	-.406	.685	-.041	.517	1.934	.517
	Succession Planning	.134[b]	.978	.330	.099	.450	2.224	.450
	Old Boys Network	-.133[b]	-1.338	.184	-.135	.845	1.184	.845
	Mentors	-.089[b]	-.793	.429	-.080	.677	1.477	.677
	Professional Networks	.197[b]	2.172	.032	.215	.989	1.011	.989
2	Organizational Structures	-.059[c]	-.463	.644	-.047	.517	1.935	.515
	Succession Planning	.046[c]	.323	.747	.033	.404	2.473	.404
	Old Boys Network	-.119[c]	-1.214	.228	-.123	.841	1.189	.832
	Mentors	-.096[c]	-.874	.384	-.089	.676	1.479	.674

Table 3: Effect of Institutional Barriers on Women's Ascension
Source Author (2016)

The results of the regression indicated that two predictors explained 20.8% of the variance (R^2=.208, F (2,100) = 12.709, *p*<.001). It was found that "promotion criteria" significantly predicted women's ascension to the CEO position (β =.174, p<.001). It was also found that "professional networks" significantly predicted women's ascension to the CEO position (β =.416, *p*<.05). The ANOVA results show that the effect of the two dimensions promotion criteria and professional networks is statistically significant (F=12.709, *p*<001). The study found that institutional barriers had a significant influence on ascension to CEO position. This supports the findings of McKinsey, 2007, and Tlais & Kauser (2011) who states that institutional barriers are a significant impediment to women's ascension in organisations.

4.3. Hypothesis Testing

The study found that organizational structures did not have a significant influence on women's ascension to CEO position, which is contrary to Martin (2015), who hold that the structures were built with male needs in mind and could disadvantage women. The respondents generally believed in the organizational structures, and found them to be fair and neutral to all genders, supporting Jakobsh (2004), that many organisations appear to have gender neutral structures and policies.

The study also found that having female role models did not have a significant influence on women's ascension to CEO position. This is contrary to the observations of Kumar& Sundar, (2012), who considered lack of female role models a big impediment.

5. Conclusions

Overall, the institutional barriers were found to have a significant influence on the ascension of women to CEO position.

Based on the findings and conclusion, the study recommends that institutions need to appreciate that although their structures may be designed to be gender neutral, they must be contributing to the Glass Ceiling effect due to the low numbers. Therefore, they need to take deliberate action or interventions to ensure that statistically significant numbers of women progress evenly.

Organisations need to really understand the truth regarding their structures and conduct in-depth research to understand whether their structures are truly gender neutral, or, are perpetrating the problem. A review of detailed statistics, including use of deep dive data analysis and predictive analytics to assess patterns and trends in recruitment, promotion and attrition of women; obtaining honest in depth feedback from both men and women, and a measure of the contribution made by women, would help contextualize the gender equality situation analysis at the organization.

Companies should introduce internal transparency measures and monitoring activities for gender equality, and develop programs that are targeted at women who are currently the disadvantaged group. Organizations should arrange for more targeted leadership and business skills training that is intended to strengthen the female executives and provide them will the skills they need but may not have developed. Similarly, awareness training for all employees so that they can recognize and appreciate the challenges women face in ascending up the senior ranks. Government bodies, policy makers, professional bodies, academic institutions should revisit their approach and incorporate gender related skills training courses, materials. Academic institutions can also develop further studies on the subject providing deliberate coaching on risk taking and decision making.

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