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Challenges Faced by Women in Corporate Leadership Positions

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Abstract

This research paper focuses on the diverse problems experienced by women in executive positions. Though women have made great strides towards gender equality, they still face several challenges like stereotypes, the gender pay gap, and the glass ceiling among others. Therefore, this paper aims to explore these incidences using interviews, surveys, and literature that already exists to ascertain if other barriers hinder women's progress within the commercial world and proposes steps that need to be taken to provide a more conducive atmosphere. The information gathered gives us insights into the fact that ongoing work is required to destroy gender assumptions and help women move up into official posts.

Keywords: Women, Challenges, Leadership, Corporate, Equality, Bias, Stereotypes, Glass Ceiling, Gender Pay Gap, Diversity, Inclusion

Introduction

Today, society recognizes that leadership is constantly evolving, especially in terms of diversity and inclusion. However, there is still significant room for improvement, as women remain underrepresented in top corporate management positions. This study examines these barriers through interviews, survey responses as well as an extensive literature review to provide an inclusive understanding of these issues. There are also numerous challenges faced by women in the leadership role such as gender bias, stereotyping, and challenges of ascending the corporate ladder. Female employees often feel their capabilities are underestimated compared to male colleagues, who tend to receive promotions more quickly (Smith 2022). This situation is worsened by the fact that there are few females in high-ranking managerial roles, making it impossible for others to move ahead. This understanding is important to develop effective interventions aimed at promoting gender equality in the workplace. Solving such problems will promote an inclusive work environment which will enhance social justice through bridging gender inequalities (Barker, 2002) thereby adding value to the gender and leadership knowledge base. This paper is particularly relevant in 2024, a time when these issues remain prominent in many workplaces and countries worldwide. The presence of women in leadership positions offers numerous benefits, including diverse perspectives and enhanced business performance (Eagly & Carli 2007). Moreover, creating more inclusive workplaces can help ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed.

The findings are based on interviews, questionnaires, and relevant articles and research papers. The interviews gathered individuals' perspectives and experiences, while the questionnaires collected data on behavior and experiences related to the topic. The articles provided additional insights into key points and issues. The challenges for women include gender bias, stereotypes, difficulties in advancing their careers, and the glass ceiling. Women often encounter attitudes that question their abilities or place limitations on their roles. Additionally, it takes longer for women to reach higher positions and be considered for promotions. The lack of representation of women in leadership positions hinders other women striving to achieve those roles.

The primary goal of this research paper is to promote gender equity and highlight the challenges faced by women. Understanding these obstacles is crucial for developing interventions that create a better environment for women. Furthermore, this research can contribute to addressing gender disparities, improving workplace culture, and expanding knowledge on this topic.

Having women in leadership positions offers numerous benefits. It allows women to grow and thrive based on their strengths and talents. It also fosters diverse approaches and ideas within organizations, enabling companies to access a wider range of talent and improve business performance and competition.

Addressing these challenges can create more inclusive and positive workplaces, providing everyone with an equal opportunity to succeed. Climbing the corporate ladder can be challenging for women due to various obstacles, including stereotypes, the gender pay gap, and the glass ceiling. Stereotypes that depict women as cooperative and empathetic may limit their advancement by overlooking their other leadership qualities. Additionally, women in male-dominated fields may be viewed as diversity hires rather than competent leaders. When women exhibit so-called masculine traits, they risk being perceived as cold and facing backlash. This narrow view of leadership styles marginalizes women who possess different approaches. The gender pay gap exacerbates the challenges faced by women in leadership roles. On average, women earn less than men, receiving around 80 to 85 cents for every dollar earned by their male counterparts. This disparity becomes even more pronounced in higher positions, with female CEOs earning just 63 cents for every dollar earned by male CEOs.

The concept of the glass ceiling represents the invisible barriers that hinder women's advancement in the workplace. This barrier breeds self-doubt and frustration among women who possess the necessary qualifications and skills but struggle to break through. It not only restricts their career growth but also deprives workplaces of the unique perspectives and contributions women bring. Additionally, the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions perpetuates the notion that leadership is primarily a role for men, stifling women's potential and aspirations. All of these obstacles make climbing the corporate ladder particularly challenging for women in leadership positions. When they attempt to advance, they confront gender discrimination, limited access to opportunities, and stereotypes. Research shows that women are often passed over for promotions, receive lower pay, and are underrepresented in leadership roles. These factors undermine their authority and abilities, impeding their progression. However, some women have triumphed over these challenges and reached the top.

Historically, leadership roles have been dominated by men, reinforcing the belief that these positions belong exclusively to them. However, when women assume leadership roles, they challenge this notion and prove that gender does not determine one's ability to lead. When young girls see women in leadership positions, it instills hope that they too can dream big and achieve such goals. Witnessing women excel as leaders inspires and encourages girls to strive harder and persevere. These stories of women breaking through glass ceilings and defying gender norms show young girls that being female does not hinder their ability to lead an organization or anything else. By challenging gender norms, women in leadership roles pave the way for a more inclusive and diverse future.

Stereotypes Faced by Women

One of the major issues faced by women in corporate leadership positions is stereotypes. Women are often expected to prioritize cooperation and empathy, qualities that, while beneficial, can undermine their authority and limit their advancement (Sandberg 2013). In male-dominated fields, women may be viewed more as tokens of diversity rather than capable leaders. This perception marginalizes their leadership potential and reinforces the notion that leadership should embody traditionally masculine traits (Williams & Dempsey 2018). Women who adopt these traits often face backlash, being labeled as cold or unapproachable. Such stereotypes not only undermine women but also contribute to a culture that marginalizes those with different leadership styles. Overcoming these stereotypes is essential for creating an environment where diverse leadership approaches are valued and recognized.

Gender Pay Gap

The gender pay gap is another significant challenge. On average, women earn less than men across various sectors and levels, with the pay gap becoming more pronounced in higher positions. According to a study by Catalyst, female CEOs in the United States earn only 63 cents for every dollar earned by their male counterparts (Catalyst 2023). This disparity highlights the systemic undervaluation of women's work and the barriers they face in achieving financial parity. The gender pay gap not only affects women's earning potential but also their career advancement opportunities. Addressing this gap is crucial for ensuring that women receive fair compensation for their contributions and are encouraged to pursue leadership roles.

Reaching the Glass Ceiling

The concept of the glass ceiling refers to the invisible barriers that prevent women and minorities from advancing in the workplace. Coined by Marilyn Loden in 1978, this metaphor highlights the systemic biases that restrict women's growth despite their qualifications and skills (Ptyza 2023). The glass ceiling creates feelings of self-doubt and frustration among women aspiring to leadership positions, limiting their ability to contribute effectively to their organizations. Breaking through the glass ceiling is essential for creating a more equitable work environment. It requires addressing the underlying biases and systemic barriers that hinder women's progress and providing them with the support and opportunities needed to succeed.

Climbing Up the Corporate Ladder

Women face numerous challenges when climbing the corporate ladder, including gender discrimination, unequal access to opportunities, and pervasive stereotypes. Studies show that women are often overlooked for promotions, paid less, and underrepresented in leadership positions (Smith 2022). These challenges undermine their authority and impede their career progression. Despite these obstacles, many women have successfully navigated the corporate landscape and achieved leadership positions. Their journeys provide valuable insights into the strategies and support systems that can help other women overcome similar challenges.

Creating Role Models and Inspirations

Historically, leadership roles have been predominantly held by men, reinforcing the stereotype that these positions are reserved for them. When women take up leadership roles, they challenge this notion and demonstrate that leadership is not confined to a specific gender (Eagly & Carli 2007). Visible female leaders inspire young girls and women, showing them that they can aspire to and achieve similar goals. The stories of women who have shattered the glass ceiling and broken gender norms serve as powerful motivators for the next generation. By highlighting these achievements, we can encourage more women to pursue leadership roles and contribute to a more diverse and inclusive future.

Economic Benefits and Moral Perspective

From an economic perspective, promoting gender equality in leadership positions can lead to better business outcomes. Diverse leadership teams bring varied perspectives and ideas, driving innovation and improving decision-making processes (McKinsey 2023). Companies with diverse leadership are often more competitive and better equipped to navigate complex challenges. Moreover, there is a moral imperative to ensure gender equality in leadership. It aligns with principles of fairness and justice, ensuring that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed regardless of their gender. By addressing gender disparities, we can create a more inclusive and equitable society.

Interviews and Personal Journeys

Interview with a Female Leader

Name: Confidential

Position: CEO at Corporation in the Financial Sector

Q: What is your position in this company?

A: President and CEO

Q: What was your journey to reaching this position like?

A: I Started working in banking in 1987 as a teller or a career banker. I moved within the ranks from a tele job to supervisory levels, then management levels, then executive levels, and then to head the bank. My career spanned several institutions. I did not face any challenges based on gender up to the middle level, but as I got to more senior positions and especially the C Suite that's where I felt that the gender bias was more pronounced. Overall, through my journey, I have learned a lot and been able to make a meaningful difference to the companies I have worked with, my team members, and my customers.

Q: How long did it take you to reach this position?

A: 33 years, 15 years to reach the executive level

Q: Do you feel like you would have gotten this position faster if it was not for your gender?

A: Yes, I do think there were other times were I could have gotten promoted quicker.

Q: Do you get a lot of backlashes because of your gender?

A: No, as a person I am able to navigate the space very well. However, I do feel I find myself in the minority in meetings at the C Suite level. In Jamaica, women are well represented up to the middle management level, but not at the executive level.

Q: Do you believe that there are challenges that you face that are unique to women in leadership positions?

A: Personally, no but I am sensitive to the fact that my experiences may be different from other women. One of the challenges that women face is balancing childcare with their jobs. Another one is the issue of being discriminated against because of their gender. I did not face this issue because I work in an organization that values diversity, equity, and inclusion.

So there is hope for organizations to embrace diversity and promote inclusion.

Q: Do you feel as though you have certain restrictions because of your gender?

A: No, not at all

Q: Can you discuss a specific challenge you faced?

A: The challenge is more at an industry level, where there aren't many women CEOs in Jamaica, especially for large corporations. But this does not intimidate me or make me feel inadequate to contribute.

Q: How did you overcome this challenge?

A: No specific personal challenge

Q: What advice would you give to women who want to have leadership positions in corporate businesses?

A: Women who are interested in having a leadership position should go for it. Do not be daunted by your gender, the truth is that there is a lot of work being done to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. Once you understand how to lead your business and teams, step forward and do not be occupied by the thought of your gender.

You have every right to be at the table and to contribute. Embrace that as a woman you will bring a different perspective, thoughts, and ideas to the table. Accept your gender and do not be limited by it.

Q: What measures should be put in place for women in leadership?

A: Women in several households are the nurturers and caregivers for the family and so at the national and corporate level there should be an appreciation for the fact that women will need space for childbearing and for lactating. So, we should provide lactating rooms and provisions for their needs and support during their childbearing years so they can reenter the workspace after having children. Legislations for maternity leave with pay should be honored and women should not be made to have to make a choice between having a family and contributing to the corporate world.

Q: How do you see the role of women in leadership evolving over the next couple of years?

A: I think the future is bright, we have come a long way. A number of men and women have advocated for women to have a place in leadership. There have been many studies that show that when women are included in leadership positions, economies do better. The government has passed legislation and established ministries to support women to play an active role in the economy.

Name: Confidential

Position: Senior Executive at a Government Ministry

Q: What is your position in this company?

A: Permanent Secretary

Q: What was your journey to reaching this position like?

A: The journey was systematic, with every step of my career building on the other whilst preparing me for the other stage. I have served at almost all levels of the education system. It required pursuing higher education whilst learning new skills and handling challenging and new situations.

Q: How long did it take you to reach this position?

A: 24 years

Q: Do you feel like you would have gotten this position faster if it was not for your gender?

A: No. My gender has never been a notable factor in my trajectory. My age was a factor though. Very few people my age have gotten the opportunity to lead the education sector of their country at my age.

Q: Do you get a lot of backlashes because of your gender?

A: Education is predominantly female-dominated so being a female has not been a debilitating variable.

Q: Do you believe that there are challenges that you face that are unique to women in leadership positions?

A: A unique challenge in female-dominated fields is the need to be aware of emotional sensitivities and the potential for verbal squabbles that you do not encounter with men for the most part.

Also, female leaders who report to male supervisors are sometimes accused of progressing because of special favors or are intimately pursued by their bosses which can be detrimental either way.

Q: Do you feel as though you have certain restrictions because of your gender?

A: I do not feel restricted because of my gender but I do take account of how I speak with men under my supervision to ensure I do not emasculate them, especially in a female-dominated space. We need more men in education and so I do go out of my way to empower the few around me. Therefore, I impose some restrictions on myself in that regard.

Q: Can you discuss a specific challenge you faced?

A: As indicated, I do not face a gender challenge in my job. I face the challenge of accountability overall and trying to improve the outcomes of the education system. I have to manage several stakeholder groups: students, parents, teachers, principals, school boards, and the wider public with a vested interest in the success of the education system. Getting all parts to work in concert is my greatest challenge. Being a female has not really hindered my progress.

Q: How did you overcome this challenge?

A: Being a female has not made this challenge greater but overcoming some of the mentioned challenges is a path that I am on. Any challenge that one has to overcome, will require an understanding of what it is and hurdling the factors that bar progress. This means improved communication, and arriving at a shared vision, it could mean training, culture change, etc. A SWOT analysis is always a good place to start to unpack and resolve workplace challenges.

Q: What advice would you give to women who want to have leadership positions in corporate businesses?

A: Women should never be afraid to stand for their excellence. In male-dominated fields, it will require females to work twice or thrice as hard to break the glass ceiling. Notwithstanding, females have done it and will continue to do it. It's really about setting a goal and working hard to achieve the same. The truth is the circumstances of age, gender, personal connections, and socioeconomic factors among others can be debilitating but they are not final. They may delay but with determination and commitment to excellence, they cannot deny you.

Q: What measures should be put in place for women in leadership?

A: Women in leadership is a major achievement in Jamaica, unlike other parts of the world. The pathway has been created and should continue to be encouraged. Areas of anomalies that have been conquered by women should be celebrated as a source of inspiration.

Q: How do you see the role of women in leadership evolving over the next couple of years?

A: Women will continue to dominate and break glass ceilings. Our girls and women understand the value of hard work and are unafraid to perform in pursuit of their goals. Further, the socialization process has been favorable to our girls, and this has helped to level the playing field somewhat.

Name: Confidential

Position: Senior Marketing Executive in the Hospitality Sector

Q: What is your position in this company?

A: Vice President, Marketing

Q: What was your journey to reaching this position like?

A: I started as a marketing executive in 1991 and progressed to VP in the early 2000's

Q: How long did it take you to reach this position?

A: Approximately 10 years

Q: Do you feel like you would have gotten this position faster if it was not for your gender?

A: No

Q: Do you get a lot of backlashes because of your gender?

A: Not at all, marketing is a field where women are the majority and one in which they succeed

Q: Do you believe that there are challenges that you face that are unique to women in leadership positions?

A:

Q: Do you feel as though you have certain restrictions because of your gender?

A: I have never experienced any

Q: Can you discuss a specific challenge you faced?

A: Because of my position I had to interact with editors/journalists of various magazines. One Journalist wanted to date me. I refused his advances so he pulled a story he was writing about the company.

Q: How did you overcome this challenge?

A: I pulled all the company advertising from the magazine. When the magazine leadership reached out to ask why, I told them about this unprofessionalism. I didn't advertise again in that magazine until they fired him.

Q: What advice would you give to women who want to have leadership positions in corporate businesses?

A: Stay true to yourselves- never compromise your morals

Q: What measures should be put in place for women in leadership?

A: Assist women in their desire to both work and raise a family. Allow women in leadership positions to work remotely or hybrid. Provide babysitting services at work.

Q: How do you see the role of women in leadership evolving over the next couple of years?

A: I think we will see more and more women assume the top posts in major corporations. And they will speak more to their accomplishments than the fact that they are a woman.

Name: Confidential

Position: CFO in the IT Sector

Q: What is your position in this company?

A: CFO

Q: What was your journey to reaching this position like?

A: It was a cultural shift coming from another country to work in Jamaica. I had to understand the people and how they worked before I could lead.

Q: How long did it take you to reach this position?

A: Approximately 15 years

Q: Do you feel like you would have gotten this position faster if it was not for your gender?

A: No

Q: Do you get a lot of backlashes because of your gender?

A: Not at all, I feel once you have a strong knowledge of your work you command respect.

Q: Do you believe that there are challenges that you face that are unique to women in leadership positions?

A: Yes

Q: Do you feel as though you have certain restrictions because of your gender?

A: Yes, women have more self-imposed restrictions. This is in addition to having to balance family and work.

Q: Can you discuss a specific challenge you faced?

A: I had to balance having young kids and progressing in my career path.

Q: How did you overcome this challenge?

A: Work from home was a solution used. However, I felt that sometimes in order to try and balance both I had to work late in the evenings and compromise on quality time.

Q: What advice would you give to women who want to have leadership positions in corporate businesses?

A: Work hard and have belief in your abilities

Q: What measures should be put in place for women in leadership?

A: A strong support system needs to be put in place which allows women to have the flexibility to work from home.

Q: How do you see the role of women in leadership evolving over the next couple of years?

A: Women are getting more confidence in their abilities and breaking traditions and barriers to venture out into spaces never tried before. As more and more women join roles in leadership positions I see a shift in policy which will enable them to achieve their goals.

Name: Confidential

Position:

Q: What is your position in this company?

A: Regional B2B Manager

Q: What was your journey to reaching this position like?

A: I was hired into this position. I was recommended for the position by my former boss. In my previous role, I was the Head of New Business at Massy Distribution which made me an ideal candidate for this position.

Q: How long did it take you to reach this position?

A: I was hired into this position. I was recommended for the position by my former boss.

Q: Do you feel like you would have gotten this position faster if it was not for your gender?

A: No I do not believe my gender played a role. The HR Director at the time was a woman and she was impressed with my resume. I believe also that the recommendation from my former boss had a heavyweight.

Q: Do you get a lot of backlashes because of your gender?

A: No I cant say that I do.

Q: Do you believe that there are challenges that you face that are unique to women in leadership positions?

A: Certainly. In my job, I have to travel quite a bit and it is very challenging to manage my travel calendars while managing my obligations at home. It actually costs me a lot more to travel as I have to pay more for overnight/overtime child care for my children. I also find myself taking unpopular flight routes in order to get back to Jamaica in the shortest possible time.

Q: Do you feel as though you have certain restrictions because of your gender?

A: I do not believe I could hold certain positions because of the level of travel that is required.

Q: Can you discuss a specific challenge you faced?

A: I sometimes have to miss work or reschedule meetings whenever my nanny does not come to work. If my children are sick and I do not have a nanny, then I have no choice but to miss work to take care of my children. Men do not have this challenge, because mothers are usually the default parent for the children.

Q: How did you overcome this challenge?

A: I have to work at night and make up the time. I have to do my best to be more productive and rely on my family for support. I work from home and this helps me to reshuffle my schedule whenever these issues come up.

Q: What advice would you give to women who want to have leadership positions in corporate businesses?

A: Go for it. Being a working mom is a sacrifice and priorities game, there is really no balance and you cannot win at all. When you are winning in one area, chances are you are losing in another. My only advice is that you should do what you

love, find a sense of purpose, and work towards financial freedom. It is important to establish boundaries early with your leaders as it relates to your children.

Q: What measures should be put in place for women in leadership?

A: Social benefits and policies that support women are important. Extended paid maternity and paternity leave. Flexible work hours and work-from-home policies. Time is given for parents to pick up children through extended lunchtime. Daycares and gyms are located at the office. Support women in having a balanced work and family life.

Q: How do you see the role of women in leadership evolving over the next couple of years?

A: There will be more women in leadership. Women should continue to lean in and advocate for themselves and other women. We are now afraid of that because we still believe we are competing with men. In many positions, we still have the "first woman" to be in that role. This will change over time and women will feel more comfortable setting boundaries and demanding more support.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, there have been significant strides towards gender equality in corporate leadership, yet substantial challenges remain. Ten years ago, the representation of women in leadership roles was even lower, and the barriers were more pronounced. Today, there is greater awareness and more initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality, but the pace of change needs to accelerate. The journey of women in leadership positions is often fraught with obstacles, including stereotypes, the gender pay gap, and the glass ceiling. However, through resilience, support systems, and proactive measures, many women have successfully navigated these challenges. Looking ahead, it is essential to continue advocating for gender equality, implementing policies that support women's advancement, and challenging the stereotypes that undermine their capabilities. By doing so, we can create a more inclusive and equitable corporate environment where everyone has the opportunity to succeed.

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