

Shattering the Glass Ceiling: (Re) reading the World Economic Forum Report of 2017 on Woman Empowerment

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ABSTRACT:

Empowerment of women has set on fire an awakening in women in which they have started to set their seats at the top of the table. In this age and time, there are more women in boardroom tables and even in the political arena than ever before. Women have become determined to push through the glass ceiling, and there are significant milestones that have been achieved in different fields that women have set their eyes on. The glass ceiling, however, just like a dark cloud still hovers over women and hinders their success. This paper is informed by the World Economic Forum report of 2017 which states that women have closed gender gaps in health and education areas. However, inequalities still burgeon in the workplace and also in politics. This paper aims to provide an introduction that discusses the concept of the glass ceiling, the reasons as to why the glass ceiling still exists in the workplace and politics, and the ways women can shatter the glass ceiling in finding their freedom that has no cloud of inhibitions. This paper concludes that women need support from other women, from organisations, from men and the society at large to shatter the glass ceiling or at least make cracks on the ceiling.

Key Terms: glass ceiling, woman empowerment, shatter the glass ceiling

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Introduction

We live in a glass society surrounded by glass ceilings, glass escalators and glass cliffs (Cook & Glass, 2014). In the 1980s, Gay Bryant wrote a book titled 'The Working Woman Report' which presented barriers women face in high corporate positions (Johnson, 2017). This was the first time such barriers were presented in such a manner that baffled many. The glass ceiling is a metaphor that means invisible and informal barriers that keep women from gaining promotions, pay rises, and other opportunities. The term glass is used as the barrier exists but it is invisible, and a woman may not realise it until the time she needs to rise in ranks, and she is unable due to discrimination against her. Policies, practices and even attitudes can drive barriers. Initially, the term was invented referring to economic organisations and corporations but was later applied in areas in which women faced invisible limits that they could not go past such as in politics (Johnson, 2017).

The term was widely used in the 1980s as an increase of women entered the workforce, and they soon found out that they could not advance beyond a certain level of management. The women entering the workforce at this time were of childbearing age and organisations believed that they would be less motivated and worried about their children, therefore, taking a lot of time away from work. This was in comparison to their male counterparts. The fear that maternal duties would overtake organisational responsibilities led to women being sidelined in the organisations. Today, the workplace runs on an invisible platform on which gender discrimination holds women back. Women have been prevented by aspects such as sexism which prevents talented women from achieving their full potential in their respective fields. This also prevents women from exhibiting their full scale of leadership skills that they may possess. As a result, women

are shunned from the leadership position (Glass & Cook, 2016).

The gender ceiling effect is closely related to the gender gap. In 2017, Kenya ranked 76th on the global rankings of the global gap report which shows that there is still a lot that needs to be done in closing the gaps which are in line with fighting and pushing through the glass ceiling (World Economic Forum, 2017). The report also reported that worldwide, women are closing the gap in critical areas such as health and education, but there is still significant inequality in the workforce and politics. In Kenya, the colonial rule led to the importation of sexist gender stereotypes by the white officials who were used to living in a society with widespread gender gaps. This resulted in wage labour, economic and political opportunities being opened up for men while women were encouraged to stay at home and take care of the family (Kamau, 2018). After gaining independence, it was almost unheard of for companies to have women as board members.

In politics, the term glass ceiling was first used when in 1983 the Democratic Party in the US nominated Geraldine Ferraro as a vice presidential candidate while Walter Mondale was the presidential candidate (Johnson, 2017). This was seen as a significant step for women in their quest to breaking the glass ceiling. The move by Ferraro also opened doors for women such as Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton who were also vice president candidates in 2008 under the Republic and Democratic Parties respectively. Later, Hillary Clinton vied for presidency in 2016. Although she lost the elections to Donald Trump, she championed a movement that is echoed all over the world in which women see a glimpse of hope in breaking down inequalities that do not allow an equal space to conduct elections or discuss on public policies.

Despite women comprising over 49.6 per cent of the world's total population, only two countries, Rwanda and

Bolivia, have attained at least a 50 per cent threshold on the political representation of women (Kamau, 2018). Africa has also experienced an awakening in fighting for advancement for women in the political arena. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected as the first female president in Liberia. In October 2018, Ethiopia's Prime Minister appointed Sahle Work Zewde as Ethiopia's first female president. The Prime Minister also appointed a gender parity cabinet which included ten female ministers out of twenty. Coincidentally in the same month, Rwanda's president formed a cabinet that has 50 per cent female ministers (Mumbere, 2018).

In Kenya, pioneers such as Martha Karua and Charity Ngilu waged war against the glass ceiling and vied for the presidency at a time when politics in Kenya was quite volatile. They opened doors for Kenyan women to push through the glass ceiling and also fight against social stigma and economic setbacks faced in politics. In the just completed general elections of 2017, the country had the highest number of women vying for electoral positions. At least 23 women were elected to the National Assembly which was up from the 16 elected in 2013. When added to the 47 women-only seats and half of the 12 nominees by political parties, there are 76 women representatives in the National Assembly. Three women were elected governors, four and a half years after devolution was introduced.

Additionally, three other women were elected as senators. In the county assemblies, the number of elected members of county assemblies increased from 84 to 96 of the total 1450. Nakuru County had the highest number of female representatives, both nominated and elected (Nyabola & Pommerolle, 2018). While these numbers are a cause for a fete concerning the glass ceiling, they are indeed a far cry from the achievement of equality in the country. It might take a couple of years to shatter the glass ceiling completely; in fact, the report by the World Economic

Forum (2017) estimates that it be another 217 years before gender parity is achieved.

Reasons why the glass ceiling persists

This is a progressive age in which women are empowered, and they work systematically and belligerently to ensure that they fight against gender inequities and inequalities that result in the glass ceiling. Many leadership development programs have been developed to ensure that women get to push through the glass ceiling effect. However, the glass ceiling phenomena continue to persist, and this paper discusses these reasons:

Lack of Clear Role Models

For a long time now, women have been accorded the stereotypical positions in organisations. In fact in the 1990s, it was rare to hear women that were in a leadership position. Today, several women are in leadership positions, but they do not seem to mentor other women in the role modelling path. Bertrand, Black, Jensen, & Lleras-Muney (2014) suggest that this neglect may be as a result of the women on top focusing on their seats at the boardroom and how to keep them.

Women also suffer from the 'imposter syndrome' in which they believe that they do not deserve to be at the top and that they are successful because they were lucky because a woman was needed to fill a given top position. In all this self-doubt, women forget of their hard work or their abilities. They work waiting for the other shoe to drop for them to be fired or even demoted. They even forget to model the way for other young women who also aspire to be at the top (Ezzedeen, Budworth, & Baker, 2015). The lack of role models leads to emulation of male counterparts as women are afraid of being themselves. The belief that when they act like the men, they can prove themselves in the organisation and this is such a misleading notion.

Psychological Differences

Between men and women, there are psychological differences that account for up to 10 to 15 per cent of gaps such as the pay gaps (Glass & Cook, 2016). Women are apt to be risk averse than men are. Employees that are willing to take risks often get higher paying jobs and are better placed to negotiate higher salaries. At times, the attitudes towards risk are inborn while at other times, they are taught. The risk-averse character of women can be said to stop them in achieving greatness, and though this point gives way to a nature versus nurture role in breaking the glass ceiling, women need this understanding so that they can know how to close the gap that perseveres the glass ceiling. Men still think of women as the weaker sex, and they are not given equal opportunities. Men prefer to work alone while women prefer to work in group collaborations (Ezzedeen et al., 2015). Women will, therefore, less likely to take chances that may seem to cause attention or change. They choose to be overly competitive or aggressive or as confident as men. Women are also believed to be emotional and moody many times.

Lack of Organizational or Political will to support Women

In both business and political arena, women have been benignly neglected by organisations or by their male counterparts in politics (Ezzedeen et al., 2015). For instance, a female executive will be promoted into senior executive, and they land their position into the boardroom, but that is about it. Women are not supported when they, for instance, go wrong. Additionally, they are not afforded resources and effort that they need when transitioning into the boardroom which is a whole new experience for them.

Glass ceilings are therefore systemic problems which are an integral part of the culture of many organisations. Organisations turn a blind eye to cultures that promote the persistence of the glass ceiling. Also, as a show of power play, organisations do not deal with discrimination or acts such as bullying even if they are overtly displayed

(Ezzedeen et al., 2015). Those at the top may deny that the glass ceiling exists since they have not experienced it themselves. Top managers also fear to acknowledge that the glass ceiling exists as it would threaten their positions and they would want to preserve their status quo.

Unconscious Bias

Glass ceilings continue to persist as a result of unconscious biases. These may be instinctive and underlying beliefs about ethnicity, age, gender, sexuality, religion, or social class. Some scholars argue that this may be mostly unintentional (Cook & Glass, 2014). However, this paper argues that this is dependent on context. For instance, Kenya is marred with ethnicity issues which are deep-rooted and have extended into organisations whereby a woman will be promoted based on her ethnicity and not on her qualifications. In such cases of negative ethnicity, then biases are intentional.

Family Roles

Caregiving takes over a woman's lifetime as well as her career, and there is little support from the workplace. Women, especially in the African culture, are expected to take care of babies, children, and as their parents' age, they are expected to also take care of them (Cheeseman, 2014). To fulfil these roles, women have to take time off from their careers which results in women being passed by whenever there are promotional opportunities.

Job Segregation

Organisations do not always place men and women in similar jobs, and when they do, there are different criteria put in place for promotion purposes. Many companies recruit internally, and in many instances, women are rarely added to the ranks. Glass & Cook (2016) explain that this may be because men in organisations outnumber women. Women also receive lower wages than men and when the women are unable to make the same amount of money as their male counterparts, pressures from within and without

pushing the women to leave the organisation at some point.

Organisational policies could also segregate women for instance in terms of recruitment practices, promotions, job placements, and rotational job assignments (Cook & Glass, 2014). Organisations also lack opportunities for career advancement and promotion for women. This is why it is difficult to see many women as CEOs of corporates. Women also face it rough in organisations with lenient monitoring of sexual impurity practices such as sexual harassment and other women feel that the only way to scale the heights in organisations is to offer sex to male managers who sometimes do not have the power to promote (Glass & Cook, 2016).

In politics, segregation is founded on the belief that women cannot be leaders. Patriarchal societies socialise individuals to believe that the place of the women is at home while the men are providers and protectors. This is to say that men are leaders while women are their subordinates. The arguments of women as leaders have sprouted from various worldviews such as African society views and even religious views. In religions such as Christianity and Islam, women are seen as secondary to the men. While meanings may be lost in translations of the Holy Books which direct this, many holds to these teachings and women in the society may never rise beyond their positions as homemakers.

Shattering the Glass Ceiling

There is need to herald the clarion call for the promotion of gender equality within the workspace, and any other field women are fighting to break the glass ceiling. Shattering the glass ceiling requires acknowledgement; an acknowledgement that the glass ceiling does exist and exploring whether it is disguised in the culture or traditions. The glass ceiling has negative effects on women as they lose their interest in organisational leadership and

organisational commitments. Women are demotivated to work as they know promotions are just, but illusions and this lowers their self-esteem. Overt effects of the glass ceiling affect the effectiveness of management styles since biases and gender imbalances are present in the decision making processes. The overall result of these negativities is that there are high female employee turnover, poor female productivity and a drain in female corporate or managerial talents (Ezzedeen et al., 2015).

Women need to stand up for themselves and believe that they can do what needs to be done. The problem is that for so long, women have listened to voices that tell them that they are not able to achieve much that they start believing it (Powell & Butterfield, 2015). In the political arena, Kenyan women have always been fighting for their space. This has included the fight for the two-thirds gender rule which according to the constitution ensures that there is at least a third representation of the minority gender in any representation (Kamau, 2018). While this has brought about heated debates especially in the addition of female representation in the parliament, the fact of the matter is that the Kenyan women have stood their ground which rumbles with the glass ceiling.

Women who have an aspiration to be leaders and those already in leadership need to develop a strong voice. At times, this voice may not align with the status quo. Having a voice does not mean being loud. It only means being realistic and practical in sharing thoughts and opinions in an inspiring manner which will evoke positive change. Women should also stand up for each other and be each other's support system. Powell & Butterfield (2015) suggest that this helps in the identification of strengths and weaknesses which women can use to build each other up. As a true leader, a woman should be authentic and not be afraid to speak their mind as long as it brings about true and needed change.

Organisations need to understand that breaking through invisible barriers to the point of shattering them is not an easy task. They should be at the forefront of fighting against cultures in the organisation that endorse the glass ceiling phenomena. Women should be assisted in the work-life balance so that they can fit well in their roles as mothers and as work executives. In some organisations such as Safaricom Limited, the rights of women are recognised. As such, there are daycares and infant nursing rooms inside the organisation where the mothers can leave their children as they work and also take care of them when they need to. The organisation caters for day care personnel and ensures that the children are well taken care of. This helps the women to consider promotion offers when they are presented. The unique needs and situations of women should be accommodated. Flexible work schedules should also be considered.

Women managers are known for their soft skills such as good communication skills, patience and other unique skills. Women should also be encouraged to work on their instincts and characters and focus on matters that are important for the organisation. Therefore, the organisation should emphasise the differences women can bring to the table. While doing this, women should also be encouraged to undertake and adopt masculine traits which include assertiveness and being strong-willed. A balance should be struck on the 'soft personality traits' and 'hard personality traits'.

Equal pay is also another way of shattering the glass ceiling. Women should be offered the same salaries as their male counterparts working on the same level of the organisation. Men can also help to increase the representation of women at senior levels of the organisation. Inclusion should also be fostered to include women in their ranks and management. A comprehensive plan should be developed to ensure the retention of women and effective change in the structures;

implementation of the plan should also be all-inclusive (Ng & Sears, 2017).

The World Economic Forum (2017) recommends that to shatter the glass ceiling in business and politics, women should be educated and supported in their career development. Mentors should ensure that the skills and abilities of the women are promoted to help others in the organisation. This call for organisations to develop mentorship, sponsorship and leadership development programs to help the women in their career paths. Women should also take the initiative to help and support other women outside the formal programs developed. Networks act as tools for empowering women and create interpersonal communications. The women are educated on important attitudes that would help to change particular perspectives in the business and politics world. These attitudes include calmness, confidence, sociability, and professionalism. The public should also be educated on the contribution that women make in the development of organisations. This helps to bring a fresh outlook on the capabilities of women (Powell & Butterfield, 2015).

Against all the odds, women have taken up fields and career paths that were traditionally meant for men. For instance, a study by Davis & Maldonado (2015) shows that more women are entering the field of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics as they advance in higher learning. Additionally, more women are focused on leadership development. This is a welcome idea, but many have perceived this as women trying to prove something to the men. While this is true, women should consider taking up realistic and exciting careers which they have a passion for and stop trying to prove something.

Conclusion

Shattering the glass ceiling is quite a hard row to hoe, and women need all the support they can get to deal with this issue. This paper has explored the concept of gender

ceiling and how it affects women in organisations and the society causing underrepresentation in the business and also in political fields. The paper has uncovered the reasons as to why in this time and age the glass ceiling persists. It is clear that pushing through the glass ceiling is not enough. There is need to shatter the glass altogether and provide a level playing field for individuals regardless of their gender to advance in their career trajectories. Shattering the glass, as discussed in this paper may not be easy especially with tendencies that are dishevelled with traditions and culture. However, any step made to push the glass ceiling makes cracks which will eventually shatter the glass. It is,

however, the hope of the author that the time frame of 217 years estimated by the World Economic Forum to achieve gender parity will be shortened through the cooperation of everyone in the society. In the end, shattering the glass ceiling will create a society in which women will have found their voices in spaces that were previously dominated by men.

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