

AFRREV LALIGENS

An International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies

Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

Vol. 2 (2), Serial No 6, May, 2013: 46-61

ISSN: 2225-8604(Print)

ISSN 2227-5460 (Online)

Women and the Leadership Paradigm: Bridging the Workplace Gender-Gap in Nigeria

Longe, J. Olukayode

Department of Sociology

Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti

E-mail: premiumkay@yahoo.com

Tel: +2348033852227

Abstract

Women in top leadership positions have not attained the desired representation in business and government establishments within the Nigerian socio-economic environment. Thus, this study examined the leadership attributes of men and women in higher occupational echelons and the inhibitory dynamics preventing female employees from achieving equal upward career mobility like their male counterparts in work-organisations. The participants in this study were 400 top-ranking executives of government establishments and private business organisations contacted through a purposive sampling technique. However, 362 respondents fully participated in the study. Questionnaire was the major instrument used for data collection. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics. Findings specifically revealed an assumed differential in the leadership attributes of

both sexes, but this variance was no impediment to women's leadership effectiveness on their task performance. Despite this, women still faced higher odds of frictions and greater sex-typed expectations which decelerated their career mobility unlike their male counterparts. The study also found that there had been improvement but not equal representation, since the society decided the norms for advancement to higher leadership status. It concluded that for sustainable progress, both men and women should be accorded same opportunity in preferment to leadership positions in order to contribute to decision making and policy implementation in the work place

Background

The primacy of the leadership value exhibited by women from different cultural background and social classes before the advent of colonial administration in Nigeria remains incontrovertible. The contribution of such women in the administration of their communities was immense (Womanifesto, 2006). Throughout the sweep of that history, the positive factors of gender were at play and significant as women co-ruled with men. As such, Nigerian women were operating at the same level with their male counterparts, they were part of the decision-making and they were accorded much the same respect (Anya & Adegbuyi, 2003). However, the overarching impact of neo-colonialism brought about the acceptance of Western-gender stereotypes which did immensurable harm to the Nigerian women. Women are socialised into a culture of gender-inequality which is almost taken as normal in the country (Aina, 2009). Thus, the patriarchal ideology which was transferred into the labour market mechanism affected the formal employment structure to the detriment of the Nigerian women.

Consequent upon this cultural interference, women in the top leadership echelon in both the public and private sector organisations fall into the minority and in most cases lack gender support (Longe, 2012). Worst still, despite the increasing growth in the number of highly educated and well qualified women, not many people particularly in this part of developing economies have still come into terms that women could make successful leaders or ought to lead at all in work-organisations. This situation has also translated into fewer women being in higher status occupations and top leadership positions (Onyeonoru & Eneji, 2012). The few who rise to prominent position and seek leadership status face numerous challenges because society has determined that only men make good and effective

leaders. Evidences around continued to demonstrate the existence of disparity between women and men in access to leadership status and the overt discrimination against women created their underrepresentation in the formal labour force (FITC, 2011 and Adebowale, 2009).

Morley (2012) opines that the under-representation of women reflects not only continued inequalities between men and women but missed opportunities for women to contribute to solving the most pressing problems facing human-kind. For instance in Nigeria, women hold less than 14% of total management level position in the Federal Civil Service, which is the largest single-entity employer in the country. In the medical field, which involves highly skilled and relatively well-remunerated work, women represent 17.5% and men 82.5% of those employed (Aina 2012). This marginalisation of women which is an outcome of an unfavourable embedded male-centred structure tends to limit the scope open to Nigerian women in their aspirations for top leadership positions and to contribute effectively to decision making and policy implementation in the workplace. Relatedly, the subordinate position of women in work-organisations has significantly affected their contributions in different spheres of public and private endeavours, especially in the developing nations. The economic strength in the country like United Kingdom can be accounted for to a large extent, in the equality of sexes in the labour market (Nathan, 2001). There is the need for greater involvement of women in leadership decision-making so that they can take responsibility for making desirable policy changes in work-organisations and the society at large. If the country as a nation must progress and develop, both men and women must be given fair and equal opportunity to compete and assume leadership positions.

According to Kurfi (2009), Leadership is an essential ingredient for enhancement of the resource of an organisation or a society to attain its desired goal. It is a structure for action and essentially about striking the right balance between the need of the people, task and goals in a given situation. Every leader has a different attribute and a different approach to the job. As Briskin (2006) put it, while it is a common finding that women lead differently than men, it cannot be said that all women lead the same way nor can it be said that all women lead the way men claimed. The lingering misconception in Nigeria is that women are generally perceived to lack dependability (Babajide, 2000). This, the men folks attributed to their poor selection and slow promotion to top hierarchy occupational status in

organisations which are largely based on the male model type of leadership that emphasizes ambition, reliability and risk-taking. Some people still hold the belief that women are less capable or less productive than men.

Empirical evidence however has shown that societal and organisational performance is reinforced by nine leadership behaviours generally exhibited by men and women (Eagly and Carly, 2007). These are participative decision making, role model, intellectual stimulation, efficient communication, individualistic decision making, role model, inspiration, control and corrective action. Differences in the frequency of use of these leadership behaviours between men and women revealed that women apply five of these leadership behaviours more than men and thus contribute to strong organisational and national economic development (*ibid*). Therefore, the practice to side-line a particular gender is simply erroneous. The questions which arise and pertinent to this study are:

- i) What are the differences in the leadership attributes of men and women in the higher occupational status in work-organisations?
- ii) What are the inhibitive factors preventing women from having equal representation with men in top-echelon positions despite the noticeable improvement in women's educational background and managerial capability?
- iii) Do men make better and more effective leaders in work-organisations simply because they are males?

Thus, this study will provide an empirical insight into the leadership attributes of men and women in the public and private work institutions within the Nigeria's socio-economic environment. It will also explore the inhibitive factors engendering the slow upward mobility of women in leadership positions in Nigerian organisations.

Literature Review

The concepts of women and leadership are open to diverse interpretations by different authors. According to Obilade (1985), the terms are seen as two mutually exclusive and incompatible entities. As such, leadership is defined in accordance with normative masculinity, with maleness seen as a resource and femaleness as a form of negative equity (Binns and Kerfoot, 2011). Thus, the concept of women and leadership to an average Nigerian will not mean

women in leadership position but leaders of women. To this extent and to the ordinary Nigerian, a normal gender free word like leadership connotes a male subject (Obilade, 1990).

Within this sort of context, leadership is perceived to be at odds with the demand of motherhood, domestic responsibilities and work-life balance (Morley, 2012). Because women are seen in most cultures as primarily housewives, the tendency is to treat the motif of leadership and women as two dichotomous themes of world of work and home. Given the moral imperative on women to care for children, the sick and elderly, this means that women have a form of negative equity in the workplace (Guillaume and Pochic, 2009; and Grummel, 2004). In this regard, leadership is perceived as demanding, aggressive and authoritarian and more fitting for male. Fitzgerald (2011) described leadership as exhausting with unrelenting bureaucratic and institutional pressures. He argued that the focus on productivity, competitiveness, strategy and inalienable logic of the market renders senior higher education management a masculinity domain. The conventional view is that the skill, competence and the disposition deemed essential to leadership including assertiveness, autonomy and authority are embedded in socially constructed definition of masculinity (Knights and Kerfort, 2004). As such, femaleness is seen as irreconcilable with intellectual and leadership authority. However, traditional scholars like Vroom and Yetton (1973) and Stogdill (1974), viewed leaders alike and genderless.

Some scholars have also offered explanatory framework for absence of women from higher leadership position. Grummel (2004) reported that leadership position is constructed as a zero-load worker, devoid of familial and care responsibility. Runte and Mills (2004) claimed that it is women who pay the toll for crossing the boundary between work and family. According to Khram and Mc Collon-Hampton (2003), managing identity, discrimination and other people's negativity can be an additional affective workload which deters women from applying for highly visible leadership positions. Maitland (2005) observed that in developed countries for instance, more than two-third of male directors and senior managers feel they are not recognised or promoted on an equal basis as their male counterparts. Empirical research conducted among Caucasian community in U.S.A. by Allen, Jacobson and Lomotey (1995) revealed that male administrators discouraged women from pursuing career in administration because of the belief that women lacked the requisite leadership attributes. Females in positions that are male dominated

indicated that there was a need to be better qualified than males with whom they competed.

Summing all, it appears that a global gender gap still remains in leadership position (Singh, 2008). However, there has been changing relations in the leadership behaviours of both sexes in organisations or societal settings. Modern forms of gender identity are more fluid, multi-faceted and varied than they were some couples of decades ago (Billing, 2011). No matter how the leadership behaviours of women are delineated, the fact still remains that women do possess the capabilities and skills to be excellent leaders. Transparency in the appointment process can benefit women as opposed to decision taken behind closed door (Rees, 2011). The dualism of leadership as masculinity or feminine activity notwithstanding, women are entering leadership positions and are being creative and innovative (Bagihole & White, 2011).

Methodology

The study adopted a survey method. The participants for the study were drawn from 400 top ranking officials from different organisations in both the public and private sectors contacted through a purposive sampling technique. However, 362 respondents fully participated in the study with response rate of 90.5%. Structured questionnaire was the main instrument of data collection. The survey questionnaire includes a cover page describing the purpose of the study and assuring respondents of the confidentiality of their responses. The questionnaire was also designed to seek information on three main constructs, leadership attributes, structure of leadership task and effectiveness and leadership behaviours. Except for the questions on socio-demographic variables, all items of the question utilised Likert scales's format, showing highly effective to not very effective, with numerical value of one to five respectively. The results of the study were analysed using simple percentage counts, mean value, and standard deviation to present responses to survey questions, especially those relating to socio-demographic variables and other issues explored in the questionnaire.

Results of Findings

Findings on the socio-demographic attributes of the respondents show that their mean age is 40.2 years with a standard deviation of 9.35 years. The picture which emerges from this finding, is that majority of the respondents

are fairly old adults, capable of holding leadership responsibilities in work organisations. The gender of respondents reveals a disproportionate representation, where male constituted 67.6% of the sampled population, female respondents accounted for 32.4% in the research study. This presents a ratio of 2:1 across the gender group skewed in favour of male. This is not unconnected with the gender disparity in leadership positions in the formal employment structure of the country (FITC, 2011). On marital status, more than eight (8) out of ten (10) respondents, that is (87.5%) were married while (12.5%) were either separated from their spouses, divorced or widowed. This finding is somehow significant given the perception of the society on divorce and separation and the implication for higher leadership responsibilities.

Workplace distribution of the respondents show that more than seven (7) out of ten (10) respondents, that is (72.5%) were either civil or public servants, the rest (27.5%) were from public sector organisations. The occupational career distribution of the respondents show that almost half (48%) were in Administration, followed by Engineering and Allied Profession (18%), Accountancy and Finance (15%), Consultancy (5%), Politics (6%), Medical and Para-medical (3%), Banking (3%) and Academics (2%). All the respondents are highly placed executives in their respective organisations. The respondents include 25.5% in top management position, 58.8% in senior management and 15.7% in middle level management. A significant proportion (92.8%) of the respondents had at least First University degree or Higher National Diploma. Further enquiries on their educational background revealed that 63.5% of those who improved their management base during the course of employment were males, while 36.5% were females. This depicts a significant gender differential in their in-service management educational programme. The average tenure of the respondents in their current calling is 15.7 years with standard deviation of 5.8 years. The respondents have been in their present positions for an average of 5 years, with a standard deviation of 2.6 years. The participants are representatives of establishments of various sizes with 52.6% employed in organisations with more than 501 employees and up to 2000 and above, 30.2% in organisations with 250-500 employees and 27.2% in organisations with fewer than 250 employees.

Questions were asked on the respondent's perception of leadership. Findings reveal that a substantial majority (82.5%) of the respondents perceived leadership as something more than just personality or appointment but an

extension of personality intrinsically linked with behaviour. On the question, whether there are differences in the leadership attributes of men and women in the higher occupational status, more than half, that is (52.8%) of the respondents gave an affirmative response. However, of significance to note is that when the respondents were asked if the variance in the leadership attributes served as impediments to women's leaders effectiveness on the job, a significant proportion (61.3%) of the respondents had a contrary view, while less than one-third, that is (32.7%) of the respondents were in agreement. Only a negligible few (6%) of the respondents were indifferent. The implication of this finding is that, despite the variation in the leadership attributes of both sexes, the variance was not in any way an inhibitive factor on women's leadership effectiveness on the job.

Exploring further on the relationship between the leadership attributes of both men and women in top echelon positions in work-organisation, the data presented in Table I show a comparative means and standard deviations analysis of leadership attributes of both sexes: Intuitive sensitivity, mean scores for male 3.42 (sd=1.26) and female 3.30 (sd=1.31); Visionary consciousness for male, 3.36 (sd=1.28) and female, 3.05 (sd=1.38); Intellectual stimulation for male, 3.40 (sd=1.27) and female 3.40 (sd=1.28); Control and corrective action for male 3.35 (sd=1.25) and female 3.01 (sd=1.36) for Risk taking confidence: male 2.88 (sd=1.45) and female, 2.93 (sd=1.48), People skill development ability for male, 2.88 (sd=1.45) and female 3.06 (sd=1.37) and supportiveness for male, 2.86 (sd=1.47) and female, 2.91 (sd=1.40).

These findings are indications that despite the delineation in the leadership attributes of women, they still possessed some attributes which were more potent than those of men and which enabled them to interact more frequently than their male counterparts on the job.

Table I: Means and Standard-Deviations of the Leadership Attributes of Male and Female Respondents

Leadership Attributes	Min	Max	Male			Female		
			N	Mean	sd	N	Mean	sd
Intuitive Sensitivity	1	5	245	3.42	1.26	117	3.30	1.31
Visionary Consciousness	1	5	245	3.36	1.28	117	3.05	1.38
Intellectual Stimulation	1	5	245	3.40	1.27	117	3.40	1.28
Control and Corrective Action	1	5	245	3.35	1.25	117	3.01	1.36
Risk Taking Confidence	1	5	245	2.88	1.45	117	2.93	1.48
People-Skill Development ability	1	5	245	2.88	1.45	117	3.06	1.37
Supportiveness	1	5	245	2.86	1.47	117	2.91	1.40

Source: *Field survey, 2012*

With regards to leadership behaviour of men and women in top hierarchy position in both public and private institutions, over half of the respondents, that is (51.3%) were of the opinion that there is disparity in their leadership behaviours. Further elaboration on the leadership behaviour surprisingly showed that almost two-thirds, that is (64.5%) of the respondents agreed that women are better off in leadership behaviours than their male counterparts in terms of values, social influence, visionary and peoples' behaviour. This finding is an indication that women could be very effective change agent in challenging the dominant code in the society and work organisation and more generally in stimulating the spread of good leadership practices in the work-community nexus.

On whether women were marginalised in the private and public sector organisations, an overwhelming majority (92.5%) of the respondents agreed with this. In fact, none of the respondent was in disagreement, while only a negligible few (7.5%) of the respondents were indifferent. On the question; whether men were deliberately shutting women out, only four (4) out of ten (10) that is (40%) of the respondents were in agreement while almost one-third that is (32.63%) of the respondents were in disagreement. The rest, just above one-quarter, that is (27.37%) of the respondents were indifferent. The

plausible reason for this finding may be largely due to the persistence of the patriarchal ideology that rarely favours women in educational and career opportunities in organisations and larger societies.

It is also important to note that in order of popular ranking, the respondent rated societal attitudes toward appropriate female roles (82.8%) as the strongest inhibitive factor preventing women from achieving equal representation with men in top echelon of career occupations in work-organisations. Other inhibitory dynamics creating slower upward career mobility for women are sex-typed expectations (81.5%), lack of cohesiveness among the few women leaders (72.5%), loneliness at the top feeling (68.6%), little or no encouragement to seek leadership position (65.5%) and lack of informal and formal social network (62.2%). In response to the question, on whether men-folks also faced these types of barriers, a significant majority (82.6%) gave a non-affirmative answer. It is clear from these findings that women are still discriminated against in their career aspirations in the workplace.

Question was further asked seeking information on whether the society is providing the enabling environment for bridging noticeable gender gap between women and men in the community- work nexus. Over three-quarters, that is (77.3%) of the respondents were indifferent, while just one-fifth (20.0%) believed that society has done much. Only a negligible few (2.7%) of the respondents disagreed with this view. This finding is significant given the situation that the presence of women in leadership position is still quite small. Further elaboration on this gender-inequality in the workplace led to the question, whether men make better and more effective leaders than women in work organisations. Almost the same number of respondents (50.8%) gave a non-affirmative answer. This finding is a clear indication that the long held societal view that men are better suited for leadership and managerial position is no longer tenable.

On whether it is feasible to have equal representation of both sexes in the top management echelon of career occupation, findings revealed that eight (8), out of ten (10), that is, (88.4%) of the respondents believed that there has been improvement but not equal representation is presently possible. However, more than three-quarters (77.4%) of the respondents agreed that the few women in leadership positions have actually been goal getters like their male-counterparts.

Discussion of Findings

Findings are discussed in relation to the leadership attributes of men and women in top occupational echelon in work-organisations. In the study, both sexes perceived leadership as an extension of personality involving social influence. This affirms the assertion of Lagi (2007) that leadership involves influencing people to exert more effort in some task or to change group member's behaviour. Our findings revealed that men alone do not fit into this domain. In today's dynamic world, leaders are needed to challenge the status quo, create vision of the future and to inspire organisational members, to achieve the vision (Ekong, 2001).

Conversely however in this study, there was gender differential in the leadership attributes of women and men in top management positions. Despite this dissimilarity in their leadership attributes, the variance does not imply that men have dominance in terms of performance capability in the work-terrain in organisations. The difference may be due in part to men seeing leadership as leading and women seeing leadership as facilitating (Sheaf, 1985). In other words, men believed in the achievement of goals by adopting their methods of masculinity, while women preferred bringing people around to their point of view using the femininity approach in their goal accomplishment. Because women's main focus is on relationship, they interact more frequently than men (Eagly and Carli, 2007). In this perspective, women leadership attributes support consensual decision-making while men tend to lean towards authoritative rule, emphasizing only the goal.

This notwithstanding, judging by the present situation, one is still not too convinced that women are anywhere since they still face higher odds of friction and slower career mobility than their male counterparts in corporate establishments. Furthermore, the patriarchal nature of the society also led to a situation in which men resented women leadership (Akinboye, 2004). This is largely responsible for the marginalisation of women in the leadership decision-making fora in work-institutions. More fundamentally, this inequality is reproduced and nurtured as a function of systemic structural inequalities in organisations (Adebowale, 2009). In effect, Nigerian women are still under-represented in the higher echelon of leadership positions in both the societal and organisational context. Many of the reasons attributed to this disparity were located in cultural ethos and the norms that only men make successful and effective leaders.

However, the findings of the study are important for organisations because women are still discriminated against and they often face barrier, which men do not usually face. Women seeking leadership roles are often denied because they do not fit the societal norms. While it is important to understand gender differences, it is also important to note the extent to which the interest of gender group (women and men) cross-cut and overlap (Aina, 2012). This presupposes collaboration rather than competition either in mutual or organisational circumstance. Based on this approach, successful collaboration can only be hinged on trust, equality and obligation. It is no longer in doubt that women have a strong component of unorthodoxy in their character and endowed with a strong sense of adventure and experimentation. Each person's leadership attribute is best exercised in his or her area of giftedness. Any attempt to halt or alter the fulfilment of women leadership mission will drag the society backward particularly in the developing nations, thereby making it more vulnerable to developmental retrogression. The study has revealed that women have the same if not better intellectual stimulation and risk taken confidence than men. They possessed people skill development and careful in decision-making and also have the mental demand of contemporary work-environment. Thus, women generally have not hidden their belief not only to lead, but also to make the difference. What is only required is the societal support in terms of enabling environment and proper training tools.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The study investigated the relationship between the leadership attributes of men and women in both the public and private organisations within the Nigeria's socio-cultural environment. The present study, as do others suggest some dissimilarities in both sexes leadership attributes. Review of literature provides a strong evidence of masculinity factor in preferment to higher occupational status as a result of cultural interference and acceptance of Western gender-stereotypes. Our study empirically substantiated the result of earlier studies with regards to this gender-bias notion. However it thus discovers that, there has been improvement but not equal representation of both sexes in employment to leadership positions in work place. Women have still not achieved the desired delineation in the top echelon of career occupational status in work organizations

The developing nations, most especially the Nigerian society needs to value the diversity of women's experiences in work life balance. Women have the unique feminist strengths and leadership traits of open-mindedness and inclusiveness to collaborate with men to move the organization forward. The gender discrimination based on management perception of appropriate work roles and sex-typed expectations in organisation should be de-emphasized, especially those engendering the slow career mobility of women into key leadership positions in work organisation. Women leaders and future female leaders must not be intimidated by what society may consider as the norm. The few women that have attained the top leadership positions need to continuously exhibit positive role-modelling to encourage up-coming women.

Based on the major findings, the following recommendations are made to bridge the work place gender-gap in leadership positions, within the Nigerian socio-economic environment. There is need to recognise the interconnectedness of men to women and acknowledge women participation as irredeemable partners in progress in the workplace. As such, investing in women's leadership should be seen as commitment and mandatory obligation as women are catalysts for positive change and development.

In other words, the patriarchal ideology which is deleterious to women career growth could only be amenable to positive change by creating unqualified partnership between women and men and building mutual trust across gender group in the work-community nexus. The patriarchal postulations must be wished away and parents particularly, the women-folk must de-accent the so called gender socialisation that prevents female from acquiring scientific and technological education. To this end, there should be general re-orientation for the society to see leadership as a trust which should be shouldered by only capable and credible person regardless of gender. Fundamental policies with possible legislative enactment that will ensure equal representation of both sexes in the formal employment sector should be formulated and implemented to narrow the gender-gap in both the public and private work-institutions.

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