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***Gender Studies in International Relations***

***What Is the Glass Ceiling?***

The glass ceiling is a metaphor referring to an artificial barrier that prevents women and minorities from being promoted to managerial- and executive-level positions within an organization. The phrase “glass ceiling” is used to describe the difficulties faced by women when trying to move to higher roles in a male-dominated hierarchy. The barriers are most often unwritten, meaning that women are more likely to be restricted from advancing through accepted norms and implicit biases rather than defined corporate policies.

***Understanding the Glass Ceiling***

The glass ceiling concept was first popularized in a 1986 Wall Street Journal article discussing the corporate hierarchy and how invisible barriers seemed to be preventing women from advancing in their careers past a certain level. (In 2015, the Wall Street Journal itself reported that the concept goes back to the 1970s, quoting Gay Bryant, former editor of Working Woman magazine, and the concept may have originated with two women at Hewlett-Packard.) In more recent years the analysis of the glass ceiling has expanded to include issues preventing not only women from moving up but also minorities.

Companies have responded to the equality gap by focusing on measures to increase diversity. This has included hiring personnel specifically tasked with ensuring that women and minorities see improved representation in management-level positions. By focusing on policies that reduce or eliminate the glass ceiling, companies can ensure that the most qualified candidates hold decision-making positions. Additionally, research has shown that diverse groups are more successful in making decisions than homogeneous ones, which has the effect of signaling to companies that eliminating the glass ceiling can positively affect their bottom lines.

Breaking The Glass Ceiling

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The African woman has always been so close yet so far away from her moment of glory. Between the kitchen and the boardroom is the glass ceiling that prevents her smooth ascension to positions of leadership. African women continue to be marginalised from attaining leadership positions in organisations despite the numerous efforts that have been made to achieve equality. The Africa Gender Equality Index of 2015 ranked the continent as having an average score of 54.1 out a possible 100 which is a visible pointer that the continent is making strides but gender parity and equal opportunities are still a far cry away. With numerous cultural barriers standing in the way of women’s ascension, the glass ceiling remains the present reality.

African countries like Liberia have managed to sustainably elevate their women with an estimated 30% of companies being led by a female Chief Executive. More so, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the country’s President rewrote world history by becoming the first female President in Africa. Malawi’s Joyce Banda and Central African Republic’s Catherine Samba Panza followed soon after to further cement the rise of the modern woman in Africa. It is easy to then assume that these are milestones that prove equality is now a reality yet there are 52 countries in Africa and only three have had female heads of state. It is better than nothing but it is also proof that the society is not yet as fair and as equal as it should be. In actual facts, if the society was where it should be, female presidents would not make the news. People still make noise because it is a monumental feat considering the highly patriarchal African landscape.

***Glass Ceiling in Africa***

The greatest battles the African woman has had to fight are those against widely held convictions that have always relegated her to a second class citizen whose forte is the kitchen. Gender equality is still some sort of favour men think they are doing women. A case in point is Zimbabwe’s new constitution which provides for a mandatory quota of 30% women representation in the Parliament and Senate. It seems like a step in the right direction as women currently make up 35% Zimbabwe’s two law-making houses.

However, Netsai Mushonga, the national coordinator of the Women’s Coalition of Zimbabwe noted that in the last elections, “It was not unusual for women to be told ‘we gave you 60 seats, what more do you want?’” This steals the thunder from what are supposed to be positive steps as it confirms the assertion that men still think they are doing women favours by implementing policies that promote equality. The stark reality is that men are doing the least possible towards equality since these are after all just favours.

Another set-back in the African journey towards women empowerment has been cultural indoctrination. Women are taught from a tender age that success scares men away and they might not have families if they are successful. Men who are threatened by women’s success further perpetuate this belief. Marriage is essentially a luxury that ironically only the unsuccessful woman can afford. Many ladies are being pushed to give up on their lofty dreams of grandeur. The pressure cannot be underestimated as many girls are taught to value marital success over all else and they are falsely made to believe successful women do not get married.

“To be honest, I think marital success is more important than financial success because money is nothing when you are alone,” one Tafadzwa Chipenzi said to confirm the typical African girl’s state of mind. If more young girls like Tafadzwa are made to believe this, it means the hopes of having more ambitious African women in the future are thwarted. There shall be no additions to the hall of fame.

African governments should do more to achieve a more equitable state of affairs. It is a shame that in Zimbabwe where there is a Gender Responsive Budget on paper, the Ministry of Women Affairs has never been in the top 10 of the government’s top prioritised ministries. This in itself is a reflection of the low levels of commitment that governments have towards achieving a gender blind society. Taking a leaf from Europe, the Norwegian government put in place laws that go as far as enforcing the dissolution of companies that do not comply with the quotas set in place to maintain gender balance in publicly traded companies. This level of commitment is still lacking from many African countries where the concept of equality is still a political pawn that is used to gain votes and popularity during election time. The promises that are made to empower the girl child on grass root levels are not followed through and consequently, no one ever gets to see what that child could have potentially become had she received the tools she needed.

Africa needs to start being serious about the ascension of women to top decision making jobs. The African women in turn need to have a change of mindset and fight the “woman for a kitchen” mental syndrome that keeps holding them back. It is possible to have a perfect family and be successful all at once. Only weak men are intimidated by a woman’s success. In fact, it is imperative that everyone start appreciating the rise of the 21st century woman who can stand on her own two feet without anyone holding her hand. Gender equality as a movement should therefore be financed to educate people that women can and should also be successful. The gender responsive budgeting models should be effectively implemented and not remain a novelty, scribbled in fancy diction and filed away. Laws and conventions that have been put in place should be enforced with a Norwegian rigor if all else does not work. The glass ceiling should be forcibly smashed if need be.

***Challenges Of the Glass Ceiling***

Gender equality has been one of the founding principles of the European Union, and the principle has been successfully upheld as believed by many: men and women seem to enjoy equal fundamental rights in their daily lives, and nine out of ten highest ranked countries in terms of gender equality are in Europe, according to the United Nations Development Programme. The European women are apparently better off than their counterparts in other parts of the world, but the recent developing in the EU might have suggested that women still face invisible barriers to their advancement in the workplace.

A week ago, the EU decided in the last minute to postpone the vote on a plan to oblige companies to reach a 40 percent female boardroom quota by 2020 as it was deeply unpopular with many of its member countries.

Viviane Reding, the EU justice commissioner who proposed the plan, insists that she “will not give up” on her quest to push the quota plan because she firmly believes that “Europe has a lot to gain from more diverse corporate boards.” Her statement is very true, indeed: reports published by Credit Suisse Research Institute, McKinsey, Deutsche Bank Research and Ernst & Young unanimously points out the fact that companies with a significant number of women in senior positions outperforms those that do not. A study by Goldman Sachs even found that closing the gender gap could boost the euro zone’s gross domestic product by up to 13 percent. The answer is obvious: women are the key to economic success. It is necessary to incorporate the talents of half of the population into the corporate leadership as diversity is essential to better results.

Unfortunately, gender inequality still persists in the highest levels of decision-making in the corporate world: only one-in-ten board members in the EU is a woman, and only 3% of chief executives are female. Progress in the entire Europe has been very slow except in Norway and France, and the only reason for their successes was their legislation on the quotas for female board members in big companies. Legislation is proven to be the most direct and arguably, the most effective way to reach gender balance in the workplace, and it is clear that on this particular issue government involvement is required – or else the business world will only do it at a very slow pace and it might require 50 more years to achieve the same level of gender equality.

The EU is now facing a difficult time in dealing with its economic recession and it is unwise to leave the female talents behind, for the various contributions they can make to the business world. It is therefore high time for Europe to act, not only for improving gender equality as it is the mission of the EU, but also for allowing women to play their part in reconstructing Europe’s economy. The glass ceiling should exist no more, and quotas for females in board room should be legislated as soon as possible – for the good of Europe.