NAME: OKPEYEAGHAN MELISSA.I.

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QUESTION: WHAT IS GLASS CEILING? IS BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING POSSIBLE IN AFRICA AND WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

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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.

Glass Ceiling can be described as an impermeable and impenetrable barrier, which prevent women from reaching senior positions within organizations. The ‘glass ceiling’ or ‘glass wall’ is a form of gender discrimination in workplaces. The glass ceiling perspective denotes barriers which prevents upward movement of women to top positions.

According to Tatenda Gwaambuka in her article titled ‘Breaking the glass ceiling’, published on July 2nd 2015, 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 marginalized from attaining leadership positions in organizations 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. 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.

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.

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 prioritized 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 rigour if all else does not work. The glass ceiling should be forcibly smashed if need be.

An interview was done by Femi Adekoya on the 16th of March, 2019 with the International Women’s Day, Legal and Compliance Director at Lafarge Africa Plc, Edith Onwuchekwa. She was asked; **‘Does the glass ceiling really exist for women? If so, do you think enough is being done to promote women in the workplace?’ And she answered by saying;**
The Nigerian Constitution provides for equal rights, so from a policy point of view, there is no discrimination. However, the glass ceiling, that invisible barrier to advancement that women face at the top levels of the workplace, remains a big problem and a challenge to society.

According to research from the University of Chicago, School of Business, there are factors beyond gender discrimination in the workplace that are holding women back. Although women have surpassed men in educational attainment, they are vastly underrepresented in top-paying jobs. Women with college degrees often choose to work in fields that offer lower incomes.

Psychological differences between men and women could account for up to 10 percent of the pay gap. Much of the existing research concludes that women are more risk-averse than men are. The willingness to take risks helps employees compete for higher paying jobs and negotiate higher salaries. Whether men and women are born with different attitudes toward risk or the differences are taught, understanding the role of nature versus nurture is key to closing the gap.

The demands for childcare, housework and other life chores outside of work fall more heavily on women than on men. Higher paying occupations are more inflexible and require more time commitment. Women have a harder time with this inflexibility because they remain disproportionately responsible for taking care of the home, including raising children. Indeed, childcare is one of the most prominent factors holding back women’s earnings at the executive level.

Despite all these, in recent years, there has been a continuous rise of high profile senior women professionals, increase in successful women- owned businesses and women Entrepreneurs. I am a Director in my work place, I have grown through the ranks in a male-dominated business. It is very clear that with God’s grace, hard work, determination and a balanced family life, any woman can break the glass ceiling. So it has been researched that we women can decide to break the glass ceiling by;

1) **Non procrastination**; Whether it’s a young girl raising her hand in class or a female entrepreneur launching a business idea, women tend to hesitate. All too often, this characteristic holds them back. The most successful women are risk-takers. Rather than waiting until everything is perfectly aligned before acting, they fearlessly dive right in.

2) **Failure is not a weakness**; Women strive to be infallible, however all great leaders stumble sometimes. What is crucial is how one responds to failure. Instead of berating themselves when errors occur, women should embrace mistakes and transform them into learning experiences.

3) **Recognize that success is plentiful**; Some women are convinced that there is a finite amount of power and achievement in the world. The truth is that power and success is not a limited resource the law of universal abundance guarantees enough for everyone. When women advance, it is not at the expense of men.

4) **Eliminating assumptions**; Women and men possess unconscious gender biases. Instead of denying them, bring them to light and openly discuss how to minimize them in the workplace. Examine how job descriptions or the selection of candidates to be interviewed for an open position might be contributing to gender bias.

5) **Aiming high**; While men usually dream big, women tend to have more modest goals. Women should be encouraged to express ambition. Everyone should stretch their imaginations about the role of women in the workplace, and females should be empowered to strive for executive leadership roles.

6) **Solicit perspective**; Men tend to be more resilient and don’t take career hits as personally as women do. Females can rebound from career challenges by soliciting feedback from trusted colleagues who will provide objective advice. Constructive feedback fosters personal and professional growth, so optimize feedback channels to maximize learning and grow as a leader.

7) **Building a network**; Busy women, who often have caretaking responsibilities in addition to careers, tend to avoid after-hours networking events. [Networking events](https://www.smartmeetings.com/smart-events-networking) should be prioritized in order to foster personal growth. Set a goal to make 10 new connections.

8) **Toot your own horn**; Women traditionally downplay their accomplishments. Toss humility aside and boast about triumphs. Women should create online portfolios, publish blogs or update their LinkedIn profiles. They shouldn’t worry about coming off as blowhards—proudly highlighting their accomplishments positions them as dynamos.

9) **Cultivating confidence and a sense of humor**; Confidence helps women overcome stereotypes that hold them back. Humor enables them to stay positive and rise above discouraging situations.

10) **Let go of perfection**; Having it all is an elusive myth. Instead of striving for perfection in all areas, women should aim for growth in what matters most. This can be personal or professional, and will morph over time.