What is Glass Ceiling? Is Breaking the Glass Ceiling Possible in Africa and What are the Challenges facing it.

**INTRODUCTION**

“The principles of gender-sensitive parliaments can be advanced if women occupy leadership positions as parliamentarians and as key members of parliamentary staff, as they are in a position to influence policy directions, change parliamentary procedure and practices, serve as role models to other women and provide a different perspective in debates”- Plan of Action for Gender-sensitive Parliaments, IPU, 2013.

Women everywhere are breaking the glass ceiling but their voices still go unheard and their contributions are too often side-lined. In many places’ women are still seen as incapable of taking on responsibility in what are perceived as male-oriented areas, such as finance, energy, economic development, climate change, foreign affairs, defence, trade and infrastructure. Even though women make up a little over half of Africa’s growing population, they have had little, albeit increasing, involvement in power and strategic decision-making.

**Meaning of glass ceiling**

The Glass Ceiling (GC) is a popular metaphor for explaining the inability of many women to advance past a certain point in their occupations and professions, regardless of their qualifications or achievements (Purcell et al, 2010). Glass Ceiling is one of the compelling metaphors for examining inequalities between, men and women in the workplace (cited in Bombuwela and Chamaru, 2013).

The term Glass Ceiling was popularized in the 1980s following Morrison, Randall and Velsor’s (1980) book publication titled, ‘Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Can Women Reach the Top of America’s Largest Corporations?’ It later served as the focus of a U.S government Committee on Glass Ceiling chaired by the then Secretary of Labor, Robert B. Reich.

Glass Ceiling is seen as an impermeable and impenetrable barrier, which prevents women from reaching senior positions in offices and organisations (cited in Osondu-Oti, 2015). Glass Ceiling applies to women as a group who are kept from advancing higher because they are women (Morrison et al., 1987).

**Features of an organisation that has glass ceiling**

Fagenson-eland and Parker (1998) cited in (Osondu- Oti and Omole, 2016) identified features of an organization with glass ceiling and they are:

* These are organisations that are often non-supportive working environment for women; organisations that tend to highlight gender differences, weaknesses and exclude women from group activities because of gender differences.
* Organisations that do not tend to help females to prepare for management positions or prepare women workers on how to achieve or balance work with family and personal life issues. Glass Ceiling is not one ceiling or wall in one spot, but rather many varied and pervasive forms of gender bias that occur frequently in both overt and covert ways (cited in Bombuwela and Chamaru, 2013).

**Is breaking the glass possible in africa?**

Glass ceiling is possible in African countries although it will take decades but it can still be achieved, as seen by some African countries eg: Countries like Rwanda has surpassed the 35 percent women representation in government agenda.

The road to guaranteeing equality between men and women began some decades back (Fabrega, 2009). Towards the end of the 20th century, gender issues turned into a major area of global concern. Seminars, workshops and conferences were held all over the world to discuss women’s rights and women progression in all areas of life. For instance, at the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the global community stressed the importance of women assuming positions of power and influence, not only because their points of view and talents are needed, but also to ensure gender mainstreaming. According to United Nations, Gender Mainstreaming is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programs, in any area and at all levels.

In African countries, governments have initiated policies that could afford women a voice in decision-making processes. Women as well, are rising up to challenge the patriarchal domination and subjugation they face in their respective societies. Many women groups, agencies and movements are working towards promotion of women’s rights and women empowerment, such as the UN Women.

Some countries of the world have adopted quota system (either constitutional quota or political party quota) that allow women have equal representation in political decisions. The initiation of gender friendly policies (especially the use of quotas), In Africa, with the use of quota system, Rwanda achieved a great feat in gender equality and it is now the global leader in women representation in parliament. Other countries like South Africa, Mauritania, and Mauritius etc. have made remarkable progress towards gender mainstreaming and breaking the glass.

In the last few decades, there have been noticeable changes in the role’s women play in diverse societies, shown in women acquiring more education and attaining career heights (cited in Osondu-Oti, 2016). Women have ascended high political offices, such as Presidents and Prime Ministers in countries like Brazil, United Kingdom, Liberia, Germany, South Korea, Liberia, Malawi etc. It has been asserted that in the last two decades there has been an increase in the proportion of women at entry and middle-level management positions, resulting largely from the activities of the women’s movement, policies of the political system, and corporate equal opportunity initiatives (Bombuwela and Chamaru, 2013).

In Nigeria, Today, women have been appointed into key positions and have occupied (though few) key offices in Ministries, Parastatals and Government agencies. Women have headed key Ministries such as Finance, Education, Petroleum, Aviation, among others. For instance, during the administration of Olusegun Obasanjo and Goodluck Jonathan women were head of key offices such as Dr. Sarah Alade (Deputy Governor of Central Bank); Mrs. Omobola Johnson (Minister of Communication Technology); late Prof. Dora Akunyili (Director General, National Agency for Food and Drugs Control); Allison Maduekwe (Minister of Petroleum Resources); Mrs Evelyn Oputu, (Managing Director of Nigerian Bank of Industry); Prof. (Mrs) Ruqayyatu Ahmed Rufai, (Minister of Education) and Dr. Okonjo- Iweala (Minister of Finance), among others. In the present administration of Muhammadu Buhari, women have portfolios such as Minister of Finance and Minister of Environment, etc. even though women activists and feminists have criticised the Buhari government as not being gender friendly because the number of women in his administration has reduced compared to the Jonathan era.

In area of political appointment, women have been given key positions such as Ministers of Finance, Petroleum, Aviation, Education, among others. In electoral positions, women have competed with men although no woman has been elected as President or Governor of any State in Nigeria. Few women are seen participating and representing in political decision- making. Although the traditional role of women as homemakers is changing all over the world, only few women have made their way up the leadership ladder.

**Challenges of breaking the glass in Africa**

There is no doubt that there are barriers that prevent women reaching top position or venturing into politics. Since Nigeria's independence in 1960, women have continued to be underrepresented in politics. Nigeria and other African countries still fall short of implementing the gender mainstreaming initiative.

Women tend to be limited by various factors, which are found in the system of the society such as patriarchy, structure of production and reproduction, among others. There are perspectives in literature that there exist impermeable and impenetrable barriers that prevent women from reaching top positions in offices. Although women in many parts of the world have made strides into politics in the 21st century but a remarkable breaking of the glass ceiling is yet to be witnessed. For instance, Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Norway have achieved gender parity in women representation in politics. While a country like Rwanda is now a global leader in women representation in parliament, and South Africa has made remarkable progress towards gender parity, Nigeria still falls short of the gender equality initiatives by the international community.

**CHALLENGES OF BREAKING THE GLASS IN AFRICA**

1. **Societal norms and pressure**

The society we live in has its expectations, usually African Society expects that by a certain age a female child should be married, followed by the bearing of children. Even if one wanted to spring up and be successful in terms of a career, it then becomes hard as they have many breaks in their careers to fulfill societal expectations. At the end of it all, many young females have set marriage goals only and leaving out career goals.

1. **Parliament/ Government**

Not just parliaments but all levels of governmental need to adopt affirmative action measures and amend the internal rules so as to give preference to women over men (according to their capabilities) for decision-making positions (including ministerial positions, committee chairs and leadership positions in the Parliament Bureau) in cases where qualifications are equal or commensurate with their representation in the government.

1. **Double burden syndrome**

Balancing professional and personal life which is one of the main barriers women still face when it comes to climbing the professional ladder. Women find it hard to balance between the two, there are little number of women in senior positions. There is often need for women to choose between their career and family assumptions are often made that women put their families first and it could make them slack on their duties. There should be a thick line between personal life and a professional life.

1. **Childhood/ Social role theory**

Madeleine Berre, Gabon’s Minister of Trade and Industry, traced the problem back to the values instilled in young African girls at a tender age, stressing that “what needs to change is how young girls are raised”. One major factor attributed to the glass ceiling effect on women is the social role theory. This theory proposes that men and women according to the social roles given to them act the way their genders are stereotyped (cited in Osondu- Oti, 2017). The stereotypical views assigned to genders can act as social norms, which represent how we believe others should act as well as personal dispositions, which represent our beliefs in how we should act. There is argument that people develop gender role expectations at early stage, which endures throughout life. Therefore, social role theory, the cognitive mindsets and cultural beliefs that come with it are important areas to take into account when explaining the glass effect for limited participation of women in politics.

1. **Patriarchal societies**

Patriarchy is a major barrier to women ascension to key political positions. many African societies, are highly patriarchal society, where men as seen as the dominant powers and women as subordinate. Many African societies still maintain patterns of male privilege and power, and ‘consciously’ holds on to the belief that men are to command and women is to obey (Osondu-Oti, 2017).

1. **Culture and religion**

There is also the issue of culture and religion that pose great barriers to African women. The culture of socialisation and the training system, which most men and women are, exposed from childhood place women in subordinate positions, where they have to play a second fiddle. In Nigerian culture, women are expected to manage the home fronts and men are expected to lead the public domain. Thus, the sex-stereotypes and gender segregation in allocation of roles in private and public life are fundamentally a product of the early socialization process and the indoctrination of the social environment (Nzomo, 1994).

1. **Limited political participation**

Women’s limited participation in politics is also an obvious feature of the capitalist society. According to Marxist Feminist theory, women’s oppression/marginalization is a manifestation of the unjust structure of the society (cited in Osondu-Oti, 2016). Marxist feminists argued that capitalism is the primary oppressor of women given the hierarchical relations of control in the means of ownership of production, and men’s dominance in formal sector (cited in Osondu-Oti, 2017). Thus, to Marxist feminists, class relations are primary oppressor of women, and gender relations secondary. These are evident in most African societies. The way the many African societies are structured is one in which men own the means of production and as such wields the financial power to play politics. Women’s works are often domesticated with fewer benefits. Men often have the financial capability that is required to venture into politics compared to women. Women are not economically empowered to play the game of politics.

1. **Political party structure/system**

Another barrier to women’s participation in politics, for instance in Nigeria, the political party structure/system. The party structure can impede participation of women because information about politics can be disseminated through channels that men have more access to than women (Eme et al, 2014) do. Party system can reinforce traditional division of work by gender, where men participate fully in decisions and in choosing candidates and women only play the roles of supporters and voters. While in countries such as Argentina, political parties have adopted quota system to allow women easy access to politics, political parties in Nigeria are yet to take that path, because of the societal construction that presenting a woman as a major flagbearer might hinder the party’s chance to win (Osondu-Oti, 2017). Thus, party quota system is yet to be embraced in Nigeria.

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