

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

Glass ceiling is when women are hindered from achieving financial and political success in a society because they believe women are not supposed to be successful. Because of this, women are not allowed to attain top positions in business organizations and political offices even if they are qualified for it. 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. 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.

Countries like Liberia has tried to breaking glass ceiling in Africa and has done so well because they produced the first ever female President in Africa, Ellen Johnson – Sirleaf, even though this was like 4 years ago because the country is currently under military rule. Malawi's Joyce Banda and Central African Republic's Catherine Samba Panza also attained the title of Presidency in Africa to further cement the rise of modern women 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. 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 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.