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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.

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 reporte](https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-phrase-glass-ceiling-stretches-back-decades-1428089010)d 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.

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.

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.

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

The challenge of 21st century womanhood no doubt has faced a lot of criticism. It is no subject of debate that women all over the world are duly respected and given their pride of place in the society. However, in Nigerian case, it has been revealed that over 70 per cent of women end up uneducated which in turn rob them the opportunity of participating in partisan politics.

Most people have been dragged down by the “I can’t do it” or “I am not good enough” mind set. Most women will wait decades to be approved by certain people or societies, they seek approval in whatever they do, this follows them even in the workplace where they would rather be led than to lead as they somehow have the ‘I can’t do it’ or ‘I am not good enough’ mind set.