NAME: KEME FAVOUR KUROTIMI

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QUESTION: What is Glass Ceiling? Is breaking the glass ceiling possible in Africa and what are the challenges.


ANSWER.

The phrase 'glass ceiling' refers to an invisible barrier that prevents someone from achieving further success. It is most often used in the context of someone's age, gender, or ethnicity keeping them from advancing to a certain point in a business or when he or she cannot or will not be promoted to a higher level of position or power. Glass ceilings are most often observed in the workplace and are usually a barrier to achieving power and success equal to that of a more dominant population. An example would be a woman who has better skills, talent, and education than her male peers but is obviously being passed over for promotions. The glass ceiling metaphor in the business world is a reference to an employee's rise up the ranks of an organization. In theory, nothing prevents a woman from being promoted, but women can see that the higher they are in the company, the more promotions, pay raises, and opportunities they should have. Instead of being able to achieve the same success as peers, those who encounter glass ceilings are stopped by invisible obstacles that prevent them from rising further. The frustrating thing about this kind of oppression is that it is covert and cannot be seen. Instead of being a tangible barrier that would be easy to identify, a glass ceiling in the workplace persists in very subtle ways.


Marilyn Loden first used the term in 1978 at the Women's Exposition in New York. At the time, Loden was an employee at New York Telephone Co. and was asked to sit on a panel titled "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall," the goal of which, it would seem, was to blame women for their lack of advancement in the workforce. Loden wasn't convinced.Prior to the conference, NY Telephone had charged Loden with an analysis of this very problem, and was sure, based on her research, that lack of confidence or improper dress was not the impediment to women's careers. This "invisible barrier to advancement that people didn't want to recognize"? While fielding questions on that panel, she called it the glass ceiling.

Glass ceiling is a cultural problem fueled by de facto rules and practices. Here are a few reasons the glass ceiling still exists.

1. Women take on more childcare and household duties than men do

Mothers who also do paid work face what is called the motherhood penalty. This refers

to the fact that on average, women who have children are paid less, are less likely to be promoted, less likely to get raises, and more likely to be perceived as less competent and less committed (to both work and family) than are fathers, men without children, and women without children.

And even in 2019, women are expected to take on most of the childcare and household duties, even if she and her spouse or partner both work full-time jobs. For single mothers, minorities, and women of color who are disproportionately affected by the gender pay gap, lack of access to high-quality, affordable childcare makes it tough to work any job, especially high-paying ones, which often require long working hours completely unfriendly to working parents.

## 2. A problem called "covering"

Covering refers to employers expectations that workers downplay or actively avoid aspects of their identify, specifically those that identify them as a member of a minority. For example, a gay writer being deterred from writing about LGBTQ subjects, a mother from talking about her children and parental duties, or an African-American manager from tackling issues of race in the workplace.

Covering is discrimination, and it prevents employees from being seen as full human beings and can hinder professional growth if the employee fails to "cover."

## 3. Sexual harassment is very real

The Institute for Women's Policy Research estimates almost a quarter to more than eight in 10 women will experience sexual harassment at work. Forty-six percent of those women who are sexually harassed will leave their jobs or even careers. For some, this could mean job hopping that prevents career ladder climbing. For others, it means leaving high-paying careers for lower-paying ones to escape the problem and the employers who fail to address it.

The glass ceiling is a difficult problem to tackle, but it's not impossible. Here are three strategies for doing so.

## 1. Recognize That It Exists

To break a glass ceiling, you first have to know that it's there. This can be difficult when it's likely disguised as culture or tradition. There are, however, signs to show that one may exist in your organization:

- The phrase "that's just the way things are done here" is used to justify appointments or decisions.

- There's little diversity at the top.

- Atypical leaders model their behavior on that of "typical" leaders, altering their management styles or taking up new activities to "fit in."

- Sexist, racist, or other prejudicial language is common across the organization, but people excuse it as "banter."

- There's resistance to innovation and change, especially over the long term.

- There are illogical pay gaps between different groups of employees.

- Fast-track career programs are in place for minority groups, but few participants progress. (These programs are often a genuine effort to redress an imbalance, but some are intended to demonstrate equality, without creating it.)

- It's hard for employees to get senior leaders' time, and there are limited opportunities for mentoring from senior personnel.

## 2. What You Can Do as an Employee

The first thing to realize is that the glass ceiling is no reflection of your value as a person or as an employee. The very nature of glass ceilings means that even if you've positioned yourself to meet every demand of a role, you'll still be denied the opportunity.

So, we assume here that you understand and have the key competencies  and self-confidence required for the upper levels of your organization, but that you are still being denied advancement.

- Channel your frustration into purposeful action. Experiencing or witnessing the impact of a glass ceiling can leave you feeling frustrated, depressed, or angry at the injustice. Use this passion as a catalyst for action, but don't allow it to control your behavior .
- Develop your awareness of the issue. Learn more about where glass ceilings exist in your business, who they affect and how. The better you understand the issue, the more opportunities you'll identify to promote change.
- Raise your concerns. If you believe that there's a glass ceiling in your organization, but your managers don't realize it (or, worse, they deny it), speak up  or tell them (appropriately) that they're in the wrong . This makes it harder for others to ignore the issue, and you may find important allies.
- Be patient, but assertive . Dismantling a glass ceiling will take time, but check in regularly with your manager to see what progress is being made. Don't allow those at the top to "park" or forget the issue.
- Take responsibility for your own development. If you're not being given the opportunities that you feel you deserve in your current situation, it might be time to seek them elsewhere.

## 3. Actions Your Organization Can Take

As a manager, your role in helping your organization to dismantle glass ceilings is critical. But without the input of senior leaders, change will be far harder.

Below, we explore some strategies for encouraging organizational change.

First, you need to open a dialogue about the issue. This can mean having some difficult conversations, and it requires honest introspection from senior leaders. Have they done anything, inadvertently or otherwise, that may have sabotaged people's progression? Do they fear "losing out" themselves if the organization becomes more inclusive? Do they worry that it will affect performance?
Encourage open conversations about these issues, and see where they lead. There may be a backlash, but you can counter this by stressing that change needn't be threatening. It should simply allow those who deserve opportunities to access them, regardless of gender, race, or any other factor.
Ask your team members for their views. You may discover important facts and suggestions for improvement by asking people about their experiences.

Next, encourage your organization to recognize and challenge bias. You can learn more about this in our article, Avoiding Unconscious Bias at Work .
A key action is to review your recruitment and promotion practices. These are the areas where the glass ceiling is most commonly imposed. Conduct a "deep dive" into your current practices and consider how they may be affecting different groups' chances of progression.

Support your teams to reach their goals. You can do this through mentoring , skills assessments , encouraging innovation , helping people to find their allies  (or to become one), and raising their profiles .
The overall focus should be on promoting diversity: diversity of ideas, diversity of perspectives, and diversity of innovation.

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.

REFERENCE

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- Breaking Glass Ceilings by Marie-Antoinette Addo