RESEARCH ARTICLE

Effects of Social Cultural Beliefs on Women Career Progression in Kenya's Civil Service

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Abstract

Purpose: The study seeks to investigate the effect of social cultural beliefs on women career progression in Kenya's civil service. Methodology: data was obtained through a descriptive survey involving 324 women in middle and senior management in selected government ministries a structured questionnaire with likert scale questions was used to collect data from the respondents. An interview was also conducted with the human resource managers. The study used the feminist theory to explain the status and experience of women) in organizations across organizational structure. Findings: the study revealed that Cultural barriers are among the most difficult to remove, as they are often subtly enforced by both men and women. They are seen as immutable Limitations: the study was conducted in a few ministries in the civil service and therefore cannot be generalised in other institutions in the public and private sectors. Practical implications: provides evidence on the effect of social cultural beliefs and offers recommendations on what the society as well as individuals can do to change their perception on women in society. Originality: this is the first study of this nature conducted in Kenya focussing on the effects of social cultural beliefs on women career progress.

Keywords: *Career progression, Kenya, Social cultural beliefs, Women.*

Introduction

In the African context, traditional beliefs and cultural attitudes regarding the role and status of women in society are still prevalent and many women are part of this system finding it difficult to dislocate from the cultural tradition lest they be ostracized [1]. Despite women's education and entry into the job market, the woman's role is typically of homemaker. The man on the other hand is bread winner, head of the house and has a right to public life [2]. Sadie asserts that cultural attitudes are hostile to women involvement in decision making positions. Despite cultural attitude some women are able to transcend and rise to positions of leadership but more often than not, it means having to jungle cultural expectations with their leadership roles.

At various times throughout history, working women were viewed as immoral and unfeminine objects of pity. Some critics accused working women of being negligent mothers. Frequently, women employees were not taken seriously by their bosses, colleagues, or society [3]. Having a career posed challenges for women due to their family responsibilities [4]. Women were expected to perform duties as wife and mother, in addition to fulfilling their professional responsibilities.

Some women experienced feelings of guilt or selfishness if they put their career interests first [5]. Because women's work and family demands were simultaneous, these demands had a significant impact on women's careers [4]. As stated by Heins et. al. [5] "Achieving professional status may be more difficult for women than for men. However the view of a woman's role in the workforce has changed significantly throughout time. Historically, the society believed a woman's place was in her home, caring for her husband and children, as opposed to the workplace. Valued famine traits such as a meek nature and submissiveness were feared to be lost if women entered the workforce [6].

Literature Review

Theoretical Literature

The study is guided by the feminist theory. The theory recognises the pervasive influence of gender divisions on social life and tries to understand women's oppression and the structures in society that espouse this oppression and subordination. The feminist perspective, looking at the many similarities between the

genders, conclude that women and men have equal potential for individual development. Differences in the realization of that potential therefore must result from externally imposed constraints and from the influence of social institutions [7].

One of the perspectives of the feminist is the one advanced [8]. She explores the cultural factors which link gender factors and social cultural beliefs. Her analysis is concerned with the social construction of gender and the assignment of specific roles, responsibilities and expectations to women and men.' the gender based roles" irrelevant to the work place, are carried into the work place and kept in place because the actors involved both dominant and subordinate, subscribe to social and organization reality"[8].

The cultural factors lead to stereotypical about women's abilities within the cultural context. The view that top management positions are only suitable for men relegates women to secondary roles. The emphasize is placed on women's role as mothers, caregivers and nurturers.

Empirical Literature

In society the socialization for boys and girls has an impact on their future career. A study carried out on career development of African American and Latina females revealed that adolescent's females lack academic skills and career related experiences and therefore perceive narrow career opportunities for themselves and these combine to pose formidable obstacles to obtaining future jobs and careers. This is as a result of socialization practices that do not prepare females to face challenges and develop other skills outside the ones necessary for the performance of their traditional related activities [9].

In society there is a belief that a good mother must give less effort and priority to work demands, she is therefore seen as less committed worker. Furthermore, Ridgeway [10] added that this biased belief is likely to create barriers to women advancement in the workplace. These barriers make women lack opportunities to present their ideas, therefore reducing their influence over group decisions.

In contrast the societal judgement made towards mothers, employed fathers are regarded as better parents and more professionally competent [11]. This notion includes the belief that mothers must do more than fathers to be labelled as good as good parents and that mothers are held to higher

standards of responsibilities than fathers. Based on social role theory that guides judgement of mothers and fathers, full time employed mothers are judged as violating the norms of caretaker role, but employed fathers embody the provider role. As such, motherhood would have a detrimental effect on women's career opportunities but an enhancing effect on men's opportunities.

Several obstacles that prevent women from advancing to senior positions have been identified. Nzomo [7] regards social cultural beliefs as the major barriers in this regard. The beliefs emphasize the superiority of men and the inferiority of women, they form an integral part of the socialization process and the gender education and training most men and women are exposed to from child hood based on the concept of role expectancy an individual develops through the years his or her own set of internalized values , beliefs , attitudes, ideals and aspirations.

In Kenya the government has put in place policies to provide equal educational opportunities for both boys and girls that have led to the achievement of gender parity in the enrolment at primary school level. However certain other factors, inherent in the society at large do not favour girls. The system seems to allow greater educational wastage among girls so that disparities can be detected at secondary and tertiary levels. A research carried out on education wastage among girls in Kenya found that wastage is higher among girls due to social, cultural disparities [12].

The socialization of the girl child in many societies is also to blame for perceived inabilities on the part of women [13]. The life of passage of women are sacramentalised, celebrated or even acknowledged illustrative of the position ascribed to women, right from the birth of the girl child, in comparison to the boy child. A study carried out on career development of African American and Latina females by De-Leon [9], revealed that adolescent females lack academic skills and career related experiences and therefore perceive narrow career opportunities for themselves and these combine to pose formidable obstacles to obtaining future jobs and careers. This is as a result of socialization practices that do not prepare females to face challenges and develop other skills outside the ones necessary for the performance of their traditional related activities [9] A study carried out by Jamali and Sidani [15], revealed that social cultural environment has a

role to play in women career progression. The dual recommended further research on the role of cultural attitudes towards female employment which is one of the concerns of this study.

Although gender disparity may not be overt, discrimination against women is still widely embodied in both law and customs. Customs that ignore or belittle women's opinions are not uncommon in many developing countries. Majanja [15] and Wood [16] observe that in some countries it violates social norms for a woman to work outside the home. Besides, women who work outside the home are usually over-burdened by having to add such livelihood responsibility to domestic responsibilities. Thus women's career advancement prospects are still considerably less than those of men. Majanja [16] observes that despite the changing laws, the exclusion of women based on gender remains widespread and entrenched in society through socio- cultural values, perception, expectations and attitude which devalue women's personalities and accomplishment.

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education wastage among girls in Kenya found that wastage is higher among girls due to social, cultural disparities [12].Despite cultural attitude some women are able to transcend and rise to positions of leadership but more often than not, it means having to jungle cultural expectations with their leadership roles.

Method of Data Collection and Analysis

A descriptive survey was carried out in an attempt to understand the effects of social cultural beliefs on women career progression. The population for this study concentrated on women in middle and senior management. They were staff that would be promoted to executive level. A total of 324 women in middle and senior management participated in the study. Human resource managers from selected ministries were also interviewed.

A questionnaire was adapted from the studies of Wise and Bond [16] to identify the effects of social cultural beliefs on women career progression. Based on responses, comments and suggestions were also sought from human resource managers to ensure that the questionnaires did not encroach into potential conflicts with organization's values. Cronbach alpha coefficients was used to determine the reliability of the instrument.

From 324 female managers, 250 respondents (77 percent) returned their questionnaires. To analyze the data, SPSS a statistical software package was used. Descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, means and standard deviation were determined. Mean comparisons were done using independent t-test and one way ANOVA.

Table 1: showing the perception of women on the effects of social cultural beliefs on women career progression

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Cultural beliefs are hostile to women career advancement	3.44	1.266	243
Traditional attitude of women as weaker sex has an effect on women career progress	3.40	1.233	243
Average	3.42	1.26	243

Opinion	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly disagree	12	4.50%
Disagree	68	26.50%
Neutral	34	13.10%
Agree	83	32.50%

Strongly agree	60	23.40%
Total	**256**	**100%**

According to the study, women are still facing a lot of challenges related to social and cultural pressures. The perceived traditional roles of men and women have not changed in relation to daily practice indicated in the table above. The working environment for women is still unfriendly both at work and societal levels due to gender stereotypes and patriarchal structures. Women leaders and professionals are still faced with traditional roles and have to meet work/ professional expectations. Neither their husbands nor their male relatives have succumbed to the changes ushered in by the era of gender equality promotions. For women to perform an equal footing with men they have to walk an extra mile .The weight of the traditional, culture and religion are cultural barriers. A participant pointed out that in some cultures; husbands refuse to eat meals other than the ones prepared by their wives. She pointed out that even learned and senior people submit to this dictate of culture and society. This hinders women career progression.

The literature reviewed during this study revealed the negative effect of the ideal worker belief to working mothers. A good mother according to Ridgeways [10], must give less effort and priority to work demands and therefore seen as a committed worker. This biased belief according to Ridgeways is likely to create barriers to women career progression in the workplace. In contrast to the societal judgement made towards mothers, employed fathers are regarded as better parents and more professionally competent. This notion includes the belief that mothers must do more than fathers to be labelled as good parents and that mothers are held to higher standards of responsibilities than fathers. Based on social role theory that guides judgement of mothers and fathers Feugen et al.[11] in their study judged fulltime employed mothers as violating the norms of caretaker role but employed fathers embody the provider role. Therefore motherhood has a detrimental effect on women's career opportunities but enhancing effects on men's opportunities. This is supported by this study where it was revealed that cultural values continue to play a major salient role in shaping women careers. Kenya indeed seems to offer no exception to African value system that emphasizes the role of women as mothers and home makers. Patriarchal attitude are still entrenched, although increasing economic needs is forcing men to acquiesce to women

employment. Similar studies carried out in Asia revealed that having women as managers violates the social norm of men's higher status and superiority. The majority of studies describe and highlight the persistent view of female managers as more communal with more feminine ways of managing compared to men, who are described as more competitive and business oriented. Against these prevailing views, women are perceived to be inadequate as managers. Such cultural barriers still persist in today's modern world and are unchallenged despite women's higher educational attainment levels. This is in agreement with the findings of this study where 56% of the respondents perceived social cultural beliefs as a barrier to women career progression. The respondents felt that cultural beliefs and the perception of women as weaker sex contribute to impediment of women career progression. However it is interesting to note that some of the women interviewed in this study assimilated, shared and defended traditional cultural notions and expectations. Some women according to the study continue to perceive the priority of a woman as a family, irrespective of managerial aspiration or position.

Cultural barriers are among the most difficult to remove, as they are often subtly enforced by both men and women. They are seen as immutable. Despite these challenges culture is changing slowly over time and that the oppression of women is not a permanent condition. People need to realize that culture is dynamic. However a few strategies aimed at changing culture need to be developed like training programmes aimed at changing attitudes and creating an enabling environment for women's empowerment for example working with schools to train women/girls from high school to advocate for popular participation of women in decision making positions in the school curricular in that line.

Discussions and Conclusion

Findings reflect that the socio-cultural beliefs have had a great influence on the career advancement of women to aspire to higher heights. Women are seen as sex whose major responsibilities are reproduction, domestic work within the home and service to the men folk. With this background therefore women are seen to have no need for education. The inferiority of women

was found to be attested to by culture. It is also entrenched in the legal system. Most glaring is the traditional law of inheritance which states that, not only does a woman not inherit from her husband's property, she herself is an inheritance. This socio-cultural milieu was found to seriously affect the females' educational prospects. As a consequence, majority of girls are not enrolled in school. For those who enter school and get to their mid or late teens, marriage and childbearing is the next logical step. Girls are often forced to drop out due to social and economic pressures. Eminent elders whilst encouraging males to strive on, convey in numerous ways to women, that their place is in the home and not in the office; let alone the corridors of powers. These are all internalized by women to further impede their progress. Those who do not attempt further education are faced by a host of socialization and social pressures into liberal arts or commercial and clerical skills, away from hard sciences. Interviews with women managers, revealed that early marriages, many children and the multiple roles of women have seriously limited their and other women's' career progression.

Recommendations

The government should introduce and sustain gender-neutral and gender sensitive curricula into the educational system. The state should modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women. To overcome cultural and religious barriers it would be necessary to re-write and reconstruct views about women, men and gender roles. To do these several strategies need to be put in place like advocacy with religious leaders, traditional leaders and local opinion leaders so as to sensitize them to the need for and utility of women's public participation. Positive examples from history and religious traditions should be used to build on, develop and mobilize the alternative interpretations in all faiths which valorise women and recognize women's rights.States should strive to remove the social, cultural and traditional patterns which perpetuate gender-role stereotypes and to create an overall framework in society that prevents the realization of women's full rights. Women should be aware of and fully understand their rights and learn how to attain them. This can be attained through socialization at home, education institutions and work places.According to interviewees the venue for tackling and addressing the constraints facing women at work is action by women themselves. Several interviewees indicated that despite the role played by cultural forces and organizations, the change has to be catalyzed by women themselves.

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