ADMINISTRATION EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE ADMINISTRATORS, HINDRANCES TO LEADERSHIP POSITION AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL WAYS OF BREAKING THE PERPETUAL GLASS CEILING

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Abstract

The 2022 Current Population Survey reported that 67.9% of men aged 25 and older were employed, compared with 55.4% of women. Despite women's educational achievements, they remain underrepresented in senior administrative positions. This paper examines female administrators' experiences and the challenges they face in seeking leadership roles in business, politics and education, with particular attention to the persistent "glass ceiling." In Nigeria, no woman has been elected president, and women remain underrepresented in the highest levels of leadership. Similar disparities are evident in education: women constitute a large proportion of the teaching workforce and enrolment in teacher-preparation programmes, yet remain underrepresented as secondary-school principals. Barriers to women's advancement include societal and cultural expectations, organisational practices, personal and systemic factors, internalised perceptions and global influences. The paper recommends mentorship programmes, leadership training, regular policy reviews, expanded networking opportunities, and measures to address implicit bias. It also calls for changing gender-role perceptions that limit women's participation in educational leadership.

Keywords: *Administration Experience, Glass Ceiling, Education, Female School Administrator*

Introduction

Men and women enter the workforce with professional aspirations, yet women often encounter obstacles to career advancement that are less common for their male colleagues. These barriers become more

pronounced at higher levels of organisational leadership, where women remain underrepresented. Female educators, in particular, continue to face challenges in advancing to leadership positions (Dominico, Fried, & Zeger, 2009). Administrative experience encompasses the knowledge and skills involved in managing, directing and supervising organisations. It includes leadership, strategic planning, communication, problem-solving, time management, budgeting, staff development, policy implementation and performance evaluation. Social expectations associated with gender shape how women acquire and exercise these skills. Gender norms influence beliefs about appropriate behaviour and roles for men and women, and are reinforced through family, education, media and social interaction.

The expansion of paid employment has brought many women into the workforce, even as they continue to carry substantial family and caregiving responsibilities. However, women's employment rates, working conditions and career opportunities often remain less favourable than men's. Women also report having less autonomy in decision-making and fewer opportunities to lead with authority (Barkhuizen, Masakane, & Sluis, 2022). Women who reach senior positions may face resistance from colleagues who are reluctant to accept direction from female leaders (Martina, 2021; Johnson, 2023). These experiences illustrate that educational attainment and professional qualifications do not always translate into equal access to leadership.

Employment statistics from the United States illustrate gender differences in the labour market. In 2022, 67.9% of men aged 25 and older were employed, compared with 55.4% of women. The employment gap narrowed as educational attainment increased: among people with less than a high-school diploma, the employment-population ratios were 54.6% for men and 30.6% for women; among high-school graduates, 62.5% and 44.4%; among those with some college or an associate degree, 67.2% and 55.7%; and among those with a bachelor's degree or higher, 75.3% and 68.0%, respectively (Pérez-Sánchez, Velasco-Fernández, & Giampietro, 2021). Although the gap was smallest among those with a bachelor's degree or higher, it persisted. These figures describe employment in the United States and should not be taken as a direct measure of women's access to administrative leadership in Nigeria.

Research on leadership traits also reflects changing assumptions about gender. McLean, William, and Kevin (2021) examined traits considered important for successful leadership and found that many were traditionally associated with men. In later research, the distinction between traits labelled masculine and feminine became less pronounced, with many viewed as relevant to leaders of any gender (Poma & Pistoresi, 2024). Social learning theory helps explain how such expectations develop: individuals learn through the consequences of their actions and through associations formed between experiences and emotions (Bandura, 1986, as cited in Koutroubas & Galanakis, 2022). These learned expectations can

influence career choices, confidence and perceptions of who is suited to lead (Pérez-López, González-López, & Rodríguez-Ariza, 2019).

Social role theory similarly examines how gender stereotypes shape perceptions of leadership. Traits traditionally associated with women, such as kindness, sensitivity and nurturance, may be undervalued in leadership contexts (Ahluwalia et al., 2021). At the same time, women who display traits commonly expected of leaders, such as assertiveness, ambition and decisiveness, may be judged negatively for departing from traditional gender expectations (Dwivedi, Misangyi, & Joshi, 2021). The glass cliff describes the tendency to appoint women to leadership roles in organisations facing crisis or heightened risk, where the likelihood of failure is greater (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). The glass escalator, by contrast, describes the advantage men may experience in female-dominated occupations, where they can advance to leadership positions more quickly (Smith, 2015). Together, these concepts show that women may face barriers both in gaining leadership roles and in exercising authority once appointed.

Education can help women develop the knowledge, confidence and skills needed to pursue leadership, challenge bias and participate in economic and social development. Nigeria has had women in prominent political, public-service and educational roles. Examples include Dame Virginia Ngozi Etiaba, Nigeria's first female governor; Professor Grace Alele-Williams, the country's first female vice-chancellor; and Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, who has held senior national and international positions. These examples highlight women's leadership contributions, but individual achievements do not, by themselves, remove broader barriers to representation. Women remain underrepresented in senior leadership across many institutions. The source cited in this paper reports that, in 2022, women held 21% of vice-chancellor positions in Nigerian universities, 35% of rector positions in polytechnics and 28% of provost positions in colleges of education. These figures point to continued differences in women's representation across educational institutions.

The term *glass ceiling* describes invisible organisational and structural barriers that prevent qualified women and members of other marginalised groups from advancing to senior positions. These barriers may be embedded in workplace culture, policies and promotion practices rather than expressed through formal exclusion (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). Male-dominated decision-making structures and persistent gender stereotypes can further limit women's access to authority (BarNir, 2021). Although women's participation in managerial work has increased, they remain less visible in senior roles, including in highly industrialised societies (Burgess & Borgida, 1999). Eagly and Carli (2007) therefore suggest that women's career paths may be better understood as a "labyrinth" -a route involving multiple obstacles, detours and dead ends-than as a single barrier. These challenges can include discrimination, family responsibilities, limited access to networks and mentorship, and doubts about one's own capacity or entitlement to succeed. Women leaders

may also face conflicting expectations: they can be criticised as too forceful when assertive or viewed as weak when they adopt a less forceful style (Carli, LaFleur, & Loeber, 1995).

Barriers to women's advancement operate at several levels. Societal and cultural barriers include patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes, limited representation and discrimination. Organisational barriers include unequal opportunities, pay disparities, masculine workplace cultures, inadequate mentorship and training, and promotion criteria that favour men. Personal and family pressures, including caregiving responsibilities, can also affect women's career paths, while self-doubt and limited professional networks may create additional challenges. Systemic barriers arise when laws and policies fail to ensure equality or are not effectively enforced. Their consequences can include the loss of talent, reduced diversity in decision-making and the continued underrepresentation of women in leadership. Addressing these barriers requires effective policy implementation, organisational support, mentorship, leadership training and action to challenge gender bias.

Despite social change and women's educational and professional achievements, women remain underrepresented in senior administrative positions, including in education. Teaching has historically been regarded as an appropriate occupation for women, yet senior leadership roles in schools and tertiary institutions have not been equally accessible. Family expectations, concerns about work–life balance, limited confidence, restricted networks and organisational cultures may all shape women's experiences of seeking advancement. Understanding these experiences is important for identifying the barriers female administrators encounter and the support that could enable more equitable participation in educational leadership. This paper therefore examines female administrators' experiences and the challenges they face in pursuing leadership positions, with particular attention to the glass ceiling in educational administration.

External Barriers to Women's Access to Leadership Positions

External barriers to women's access to leadership include contextual and organisational factors. Contextual barriers arise from the patriarchal social norms in which people are raised and socialised, while organisational barriers are embedded in school structures and practices shaped by the same norms. These barriers include social pressure to conform to traditional gender roles, expectations that women prioritise motherhood and caregiving, and difficulties balancing work and family responsibilities.

Socialisation can encourage men to seek positions of responsibility while presenting women's leadership aspirations as a potential source of conflict. A woman who takes on a leadership role may be assumed to have less time for her partner, children or household duties. By contrast, a man's reduced involvement in family responsibilities may be more readily accepted as part of holding a demanding position. These

expectations can create anxiety for women, particularly when marriage and children are treated as evidence of stability in men but as potential constraints on women's availability, working hours or career priorities.

Gendered expectations can also shape how people understand leadership aspirations. Men may be more likely to view leadership as a route to authority, recognition and social prestige. At the same time, women may describe it as an opportunity to serve the educational community and improve their schools. Men may also be more likely to put themselves forward for administrative positions. When women do seek leadership roles, they may face doubts about their suitability and be expected to demonstrate exceptional competence. Male administrators may be presumed to command greater credibility, authority and respect among staff and pupils, while women may have to work harder to establish the same standing.

Women leaders can face criticism both for conforming to and for departing from gender expectations. Those who adopt an authoritarian or conventionally masculine leadership style may be judged more harshly than men who behave similarly and labelled "iron women" or described as aggressive, manipulative or domineering. These perceptions reflect the stereotype that leadership is inherently male, a "think administrator, think male" bias, which can influence who is considered suitable for leadership and who feels able to seek such positions.

Psychological Ways of Breaking the Perpetual Glass Ceiling

Psychologists can support female administrators in addressing leadership barriers by helping them identify and challenge internalised biases and stereotypes, build leadership skills and confidence, access mentorship and professional networks, strengthen resilience and stress-management skills, and develop effective communication and negotiation strategies.

Gender stereotypes are oversimplified beliefs about the characteristics, roles, abilities and interests of men and women. They can restrict opportunities, reinforce inequality and undermine confidence and self-esteem. Examples include assumptions that women are nurturing and men are assertive, that men make better leaders while women make better caregivers, or that women are emotional while men are rational. Recognising and challenging such assumptions is an important step towards more equitable leadership opportunities.

Conclusion

Women continue to face barriers to equal representation and influence in professional and political leadership. The figures cited in this paper indicate that women have held a small proportion of seats in Nigeria's National Assembly and that relatively few women have served as deputy governors since 1999. Women seeking leadership roles should be prepared to encounter discrimination, but they should not be expected to accept prejudice or remain silent about it. At

the same time, responsibility for addressing these barriers rests with institutions and society, not only with individual women. Investing in women's education benefits individuals, families, communities and nations and contributes to broader development goals.

Suggestions

The following suggestions are made:

1. Women who accept leadership positions should be supported in balancing their professional responsibilities with family and caregiving roles.
2. Recruitment and selection processes should use gender-neutral criteria and, where appropriate, anonymise applications to reduce bias.
3. Institutions should support networking opportunities through women's professional organisations, conferences, seminars and workshops.
4. Organisations should establish fair systems to recognise and reward women's contributions, supporting retention and career advancement.
5. Government and public institutions should recognise women's achievements and promote women's participation in leadership.
6. Policymakers should review and strengthen policies that promote equal pay and equitable representation, including considering appropriate measures such as leadership quotas.
7. Women in leadership should be encouraged and supported to mentor other women. Institutions should also address unequal access to informal networks and sponsorship, which can affect career advancement.

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