Glass Ceiling and Women Career Advancement: Evidence from Nigerian Construction Industry

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Abstract

Despite the fact that women possess the required knowledge, skills, competencies, training and experiences to perform effectively and efficiently in construction industry, they experience entry and career advancement barriers. This research examines the effects of glass ceiling syndrome on women career advancement in construction industry. Data were obtained through structured questionnaire distributed to workers of selected construction companies. The findings reveal that some of the barriers mentioned in the literature against women career advancement in construction are prevalent in Nigeria, except the existence of equality in respect of male and female in terms of employment and career development opportunity. Also, low women participation in Nigerian construction industry begins in choosing course, education and continues throughout recruitment process. The aim is to encourage women's participation in construction industry and employers to tackle the industry's environmental issues by introducing flexible work hour, reducing workload and making the works less tedious and stressful. Also, use of foul languages, harassment of women should be eradicated and continuous supports to balance and family responsibilities should be given.

Keywords:

Glass ceiling, Women career, Advancement, Construction industry, Management.

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Introduction

There is no doubt that significant progress has been achieved in furthering the cause of gender equality in the labor market over recent decades. Women have been moving steadily towards occupations, professions and managerial jobs previously reserved for men. Their access to education and training continues to improve, providing many with the necessary qualifications to aspire to jobs in senior management (ILO, 2004). This is evident in Nigeria as shown by the increased number of women in both traditional occupations (fields like teaching, trading, nursing, banking, pharmacy, and so on) and non-traditional occupations (such as builders, mechanics, architects, contractors, project managers, etc.). Despite this welcome development, Nigerian women are few and constitute small percentage of the top management jobs in industries like construction, banking, telecommunication, aviation, oil and gas, manufacturing, mining, and so forth. Even in a woman dominated profession like teaching, for example, majority of teachers are women while top administration are men dominated. Similarly in the health field, doctors and hospital heads are very often men, while most of the nurses and support staff are women. Although, recently, women are beginning to penetrate non-traditional professions such as construction, project management, mining, but they are woefully under-represented and in most cases stuck at lower levels.

Governments, businesses, trade unions and women's organizations have devoted much thought and energy to overcoming the attitudinal and institutional discrimination that bars women from certain jobs and hinders their career development, while the commitment to fight gender discrimination is renewed periodically at international conferences. Yet, many of the results fall short of expectations (ILO, 2004). Also, there is the evidence that employers are beginning to promote women more systematically and to introduce family-friendly policies in order to attract and retain them, despite this enforce, women found it difficult to break through a syndrome generally refers to as 'glass ceiling'. Glass ceiling is a syndrome that hinders women attraction and progressing especially when compared to the total number of females

in the workforce (Abdullahi, 2007; Amaratunga et al., 2007; Ginige et al., 2007; Thurairajah, 2007; Hawkes & Iversen, 2008; Ling & Leow, 2008; Claudi, 2010; Okafor et al., 2010; Mordi et al., 2011). This is an occurrence in the world of work that stuck women at lower levels in workplaces (Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990).

The 'glass ceiling' syndrome was coined by Wall Street Journal some years ago to mean an organizational invisible, implicit but impenetrable barriers that prevent women from achieving parity with their male counterparts at the highest levels of the corporate ladder (Maxwell, 2007). The 'glass ceiling' refers to an invisible barrier which women face as they attempt to achieve promotion to the higher levels of organizations or seeking employment to some industries. According to Microsoft Encarta World Encyclopedia, the term glass ceiling is a "barrier to career advancement: an unofficial but real impediment to somebody's advancement into upper-level management positions because of dissemination based on the person's gender, age, race, ethnicity, or sexual preference". Morgan (1998) describes it "as cases in which women begin their careers on an equal footing with men, and either lose ground gradually over time, or continue to progress on par with their male counterpart until, at some point, their progress is blocked".

Although, the Federal Government of Nigeria, in the Third National Development Plan made provisions for the participation of women in both traditional and non-traditional careers, it is only recently women representation in management/policy making is gradually increasing. In fact, the current government is advocating for (35%) of women participation in strategic or managerial positions. These policies have led to significant changes of influx of women to workforce and progress achieved. Owolabi (2007) earlier asserts that significant changes have occurred in gender-roles and in greater gender-based division of labor over the past and such changes are the dramatic influx of women into the workforce and the progress that women have made by entering positions and careers initially thought to be a reservation for men.

But compared to men, women are often left behind when it comes to advancement even if they have the same educational background and work experiences. Surprisingly, glass ceiling yet exists despite that several studies in industries ranging from manufacturing to high tech consumer goods show that women often outpace their male colleagues on many measures of leadership and management ability (Barbara, 2005). The findings of California-based Hagsberg Consulting Group study conducted in 2000 reveal that women executives outpace their male counterparts on forty two of fifty two essential management skills. Specifically, female executives, when rated by their peers, bosses, and subordinates, score higher than their male colleagues on such measures as producing high-quality work, setting goals, and mentoring. Women also win kudos for being more collaborative, better motivators, and more willing to share information with others than many men are (Sharpe, 2000). Also, Catalyst (2004) found that companies with a higher representation of women in top management jobs financially outperform companies with fewer women at the top. Despite these achievements, women still strive to emerge and grow out of male oppression and move to higher levels.

However, women who choose non-traditional jobs can face special constraints in the workplace, not least of which are isolation, limited access to mentoring and female role models, and sexual harassment (ILO, 2004). This is evident by low women representation in project/construction management over the world. The glass ceiling in construction companies is still firmly in place. This is an unfortunate fact that is not commonly known to young aspiring women on entering a technical/construction career as a professional (Claudi, 2010).

Although, several studies done on glass ceiling and women career advancement have concentrated on the experiences of females at top management level of organization (Maxwell, 2007; ILO, 2004; Akunyili, 2006; Owolabi, 2007; Okafor et al., 2010; Mordi et al., 2011), very little, if at all, had been done on Nigerian women participations in project/construction companies. Despite the important role women have to play in all economic activities, they are still under-represented

in construction industry. In the light of this, more research needs to be undertaken on women participation, experience, limitations and challenges in project/construction management. This research critically examined the challenges faced by Nigerian women in entry and making career progress in project/construction management.

Literature Review

The construction industry is defined "as one that employs workers in two main categories (i) managers and professionals who plan, organize, advise on specialist functions or field activities involved in executing projects; (ii) construction trades, who construct, install, finish, maintain and repair internal and external structures of domestic, commercial and install building and civil construction (Employment Service, 1990; as cited in Fielden et al., 2000). While historically, women in Africa built their huts, houses and homes, clayed floors, thatched roofs, cultivated the land, made money and raised their kids, while men were busy with more important things elsewhere (Mthembi-Mahanyele, as cited in Verwey, 2005). But today the modern construction industry with its extreme gender stratification is still conservative in its recruitment of women. The prevalent social conditions which underpin the occupational segregation of the labor market into masculine and feminine jobs is as imperforate today, as it was at the beginning of the century with construction as the prime example. The majority of women working in the construction industry undertake administrative, technical, professional work, personal and protective services while the intake at the operative level is very low and the data are scarce to non-existent, but in most countries these represent less than (1%) of the workforce (Clarke et al., 2005).

The ways in which construction organizations are structured and the policies and practices implemented have great impact on women's intake and attainment to leadership positions (Blum, Fields & Goodman, 1994). There is a large body of literature on the ways in which workplaces are organized around and support men's work styles and life cycles, even those that appear to be "gender-neutral"

and meritocratic (Acker, 1990; Reskin & McBrier, 2000). This is an evidence again that the men in the position of human resource management are still set in their ways of not changing too much of the system by employing women in the construction trades (Claudi, 2010). Inevitably, it can be concluded that construction is not only male-dominated but is devoid of female participation. There are many studies discussing the reasons why female workers shy away from the construction industry as a whole and the craft sector in particular (Agapiou, 2002; Whittock, 2002; Wangle, 2009). Among the common barriers are social acceptances of employment, sexually-inappropriate occupation, sexual discrimination, sexual harassment, physical incapability, unqualified for blue-collar jobs and labor conditions such as extreme weather, unsociable work-hours and exposure to hazards.

Barriers to Women Participation in Project Management

From the literature's point of view, the following are causes of glass ceiling in project management (Amaratunga et al., 2007; Ginige et al., 2007; Elizabeth, 2011).

Family Responsibility

Family responsibility refers to instrumental activities relating to child upbringing, providing goods and support services for the family. Family responsibilities had played a major role in whether or not the women had accepted the jobs. Some of them had delayed accepting them until their children were older (ILO, 2004). According to ILO (2000), family responsibility is an important feature of professions and especially construction work, since it sometimes requires long hours on site to gain experience and recognition, leading to women who want both family and a career have to juggle heavy responsibility in both domains. Research shows that contemporary women's careers and lives appear to be inextricably entwined; work and private lives are interconnected (O'Neal et al., 2008). The conflict between work and family obligations, that many construction professionals experience, is more acute for women than for men (Amaratunga et al., 2007).

According to Lingard and Francis (2002), job demands borne by construction professionals are damaging to their family and domestic responsibilities. Site based employees, both professional and manual workers, are usually subject to changing work locations. These practices prevent and retard women career progression in construction management.

Image of the Construction Industry

Image is the mental picture, which is created through information gained from the external environment and processed internally with relevant past experiences, on a certain aspect (Ginige et al., 2007). The most important contributor to women hesitating to enter the industry or choose construction as a viable career and women leaving the industry is the image of the industry (Hatipkarasulu & Roff, 2011). The literature identifies the industry's image was found to militate against the entry of women (Amaratunga et al., 2007; Ginige et al., 2007). The prevalence culture of male-dominance or overt masculine image, long hours on sites, inclement weather, inappropriate language and unwelcome sexual conduct make the profession unattractive to women. In fact, people believe that the industry involves masculine trades such as bricklaying, carpentry, plumbing, plastering, and so on only suitable for men. This belief appears after university enrollment where male students are five times more likely than their female counterparts to consider a career in the construction industry (Gale, 1999). Therefore, to break the glass ceiling in project and construction management, it is important to improve the image, culture and working conditions.

Training Courses Discrimination

Despite the fact that admission to Nigerian higher institutions to study project/construction management related courses (such as civil engineering, building technology, quantity surveying, architecture, land surveying, project management, estate management) is not gender bias but practically, the core courses and training provided by institutions, training organizations and employers create a whole host

of problems for women arising from the male-dominated environment and masculine culture (Gale, 1994). A survey of students' enrollment to project management related disciplines has increased and they have taken the lead in terms of outstanding performance in all areas of specializations; however, only few are found to purse career in technical areas of construction. The opinion of Amaratunga et al. (2007) is that "women are also more likely to be found in staff (like personnel, HR, communications) rather than line (service delivery, production) functions". Dainty et al. (2000) indicated that lack of role model, poor career advice, gender biased recruitment, peer pressure and poor educational experiences are some factors that limit women's entry to the industry which affects the career aspirations and development.

Recruitment Process

Women seeking employment or apprenticeship opportunities in the construction industry often face employers who are unwilling to hire women or support them in completing apprenticeships. It is widely acknowledged that women face discrimination and stereotyping in hiring (Women in Leadership Foundation, 2008; Wage Gap Reduction Initiative, 2007). Hossain and Kusakabe (2005) found that recruitment process is a major barrier identified by technical women in entry of construction industry. Employers prefer men for tedious, dirty, hazardous tasks with long working hours on sites, also even for tasks such as designing, cost estimation, mapping and documentation. The general believe is that women need a reasonable level of strength and fitness for some job requiring above average upper body strength for lifting and heavy operations. Some employers believe that construction is unsuitable for women and it manifests in the recruitment process where employment is often informal and through personal contacts (Dainty et al., 2000). Surveys of project/construction firms show a few women on staff list and in some cases they are mostly engaged as casuals or laborers.

Inadequate Informal Networks

The ability to network successfully both formally and informally is paramount to career advancement and project/construction industry. Being male dominated networks, women face less informal communication. Hawkes and Iversen (2008) assert that women lack formal and informal networks and are less to have mentors because they are few in construction sector. Women receive less mentoring or less effective mentoring than male due to the fact that women have restricted access to potential mentors, mentors being unwilling to enter relationships with them, and concerned that others would disapprove of relationships or misinterpret a mentorship approach as a sexual advance (Lyness & Thompson, 2000). Women compare to men workers in non-traditional occupations do not have adequate access to the informal networks.

Discrimination and Harassment

Discrimination and harassment contribute seriously to glass ceiling in construction management. In the study of Pollard (2005), discrimination against women manifest itself in various forms including: Job segregation, wage gaps, sexual harassment, the denial of career entry and progression, including mentoring and poor performance evaluations. Aulin and Jingmond (2010) posit that construction industry is characterized by whole workplace culture poses problems to female workers on site. For example, temporary sanitary facilities are usually unisex, often without privacy and generally not well maintained. Fielden et al. (1999) indicated that the industry is known for frequent arguments, conflicts and crisis. Sexual harassment also tends to occur more frequently in workplaces because some sites are isolated. Women may be subjected to inappropriate language or unwelcome sexual conduct. In fact, if male supervisors or colleagues resent the presence of women in their workplace, they may use sexually harassing behavior to humiliate them (ILO, 2004). Harassment can be verbal, physical or visual and this is the culture and tradition of the construction industry (Claudi, 2010). On these grounds, besides women possessing required technical skills, they must be able to adapt

to the industry behavior which is a serious challenge.

Material and Methods

Questionnaire was used to obtain the necessary data from one hundred and twenty respondents consisting of male and female from eight selected organizations located in Lagos and Sango-Ota environment. Judgmental sampling method was adopted to select respondents from the study population who can offer the contributions sought. Lagos and Sango-Ota were chosen because of their cosmopolitan nature and their status as commercial and educational institutions. In addition, the study areas are quite active in terms of project/construction activities. Respondents were asked to indicate their answers on a five-point Likert scale, 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). Any rating involving 1 and 2 was considered as disagreement while rating involving 4 and 5 was considered as agreement for purposes of average ratings. The undecided scale of the responses was not considered in this research in order to avoid the problem of central tendency and to secure more effective screening power (Sin & Tse, 2002). The in-depth review of studies on glass ceiling and gender inequality in non-traditional career occupations confirmed the content validity. Internal consistency (Clark & Watson, 2007) of the research instrument which was measured using Cronbach Alpha Coefficient (1951) has a reliability coefficient of 0.71.

Results and Discussion

A total of one hundred and twenty questionnaires were distributed to respondents and total of one hundred twelve questionnaires were retrieved but some were partially filled. Respondents' demographic profile is presented in Table 1. It is evident from the findings that the selected construction companies are male dominated which is similar across the globe as indicated in past studies. All the respondents are educated having at least SSCE certificate; with (46.6%) having a postgraduate degree, (48.8%) of the respondents with a first degree (BS). Few of the respondents (4%) has less than 1st degree. Analysis

of respondents' work experience reveals that a significant number of the respondents (95.2%) had been with the companies for more than five years while only four respondents had worked between 0-5 years. It seems that people are not attracted to seek career in construction industry.

Table 1: Demographic Profile

Gender	Male	Female	Total
Frequency	56	29	85
Percentage	65.9%	34.1%	100
Educational Level	M.Sc.	B.Sc./HND	OND/NCE/SSCE
Frequency	39	41	4
Percentage	46.6%	48.8%	4.8%
Work Experience	0-5 Years	6-10 Years	10 Years & above
Frequency	4	30	49
Percentage	4.8%	36.2%	59%

Source: Field Survey, 2012

Issues relating to Glass Ceiling in Construction

Eight issues that women always contend with in construction industry were presented to the respondents to rank in order of seriousness. Percentage of the responses was calculated as shown in Table 2. The findings reveal that there is no discrimination between male and female in terms of employment requirements (A1) and career development opportunity (A2). This finding is in contrast to the general position in literature which indicated that having physical strength and fitness is a selection criterion for applying for a position in the construction industry (Greckol, 1987; Claudi, 2010). As indicated by Hossain and Kusakabe's (2005) study, the major barrier indentified by women engineers in Thailand and Bangladesh is the recruitment process

which favors the male workers. However, this finding is consistent with Health and Safety Executives, UK which removed barrier of physical strength (Claudi, 2010), in recruitment process and career development in construction management. Despite the equality in employment and career development opportunity for all workers, it is agreed (45.6%) that the organizational structure favors male rather than female in term of promotion (A3). The assumption that women must be outstanding in assigned tasks compared to their male counterparts, before they can be promoted received an equal response from the sample.

Environmental issues are another serious factor militating against women in construction industry in terms of entry and career progression. Findings show a high ranking of this problem, meaning that women face long work hours in heavy and stressful jobs in isolated sites. These greatly contribute to women inefficiency, lost of interest in the industry and some choose to leave for other industries with better prospects. This result is consistent with Lingard and Sublet's (2002) study as cited in Ling and Leow (2008), which posit that the only most important factor in determining relationship quality among married engineers is the number of hours they work each week. To encourage more women participation, the length of working hours must be reduced to provide time for more family responsibilities.

Respondents, however, disagree with issues relating to pay inequality between female and male workers with similar qualifications, experiences on the same managerial or organizational level. The analysis reveals that (52.8%) of the respondents confirmed that there is no discrepancy in payment between males and females. However, gender discrimination occurs in Nigerian construction industry because in most cases men prefer not to work under female boss (42.6%) and they assume that women are not sufficiently competitive and ambitious (52.5%); which seems to be an important requirement in this recent turbulent Nigerian business environment.

Table 2: Results of Issues toward Glass Ceiling Syndrome

Rank	Issues	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
A1	Equality in respect for male and female in terms of employment	67.4	24.8
A2	Equality in career development opportunity for male rather than female	57.0	26.0
A3	Organization structure favors male in terms of promotion	45.6	29.7
A4	Females have to perform better to be promoted	42.6	42.6
A5	Existence of environmental issues (i.e. long working hour, stressful and heavy workload)	42.6	33.7
A6	Pay inequality among females and males on same levels	35.8	52.8
A7	Perception that women should not be head over men	42.6	34.7
A8	Belief that women are not sufficiently competitive and ambitious	52.5	31.7

Source: Field Survey, 2012

Factors affecting Women Career in Construction

Table 3 reveals that advanced education and providing specialized training and provision of specialized training (B1) and having work experience (B2) are the most important factors that facilitate women career development. These practices are important to all workers for always being exposed to advanced skills of project management. The finding is consistent with the study of Ling and Leow's (2008) study which indicated that providing courses for women to update themselves after career breaks or childbirth are useful measures. Other issues relating to professional membership (B3) and taking business risk (B4) received high responses of (68.4%) and (79.2%) respectively. Li and Wearing (2003) posit that issues related to competence, experience and education have been widely researched and discussed among the reasons why women cannot be promoted from middle to senior management positions. This is a serious barrier to women empowerment. Abdullahi (2006) identified inadequate education, training and experience in the past, as contributive to the difficulties women experience in getting management jobs.

From these discussions, it is clear that women participation in construction management can be improved through effective education, specialization, tailored training and being a member of relevant professional bodies.

Women's right informal network is as important as formal relationship. The findings show that (56.4%) (B5) of respondents indicated that informal networking with both male and female workers is fundamental for women tasks accomplishment. This result is in conformation with past studies (Li & Wearing, 2003; Andrews & Wilkins, 2003; Bruni et al., 2004.

Over half of the respondents (58.4%) claimed that lack of confidence and timidity have negatively impacted women career advancement (B6), while a good number of the respondents (56.4%) believed that lack of women role models/mentors impede women career advancement in the construction industry. Research evidence indicates that women have been reported to have greater barriers for getting a mentor than men workers (Scandura, 1999). Mordi et al. (2011) found out that career mentoring and coaching is a key impediment to women advancement. They further highlighted various problems associated with the issue of mentoring such as the fact that there were fewer women mentors, 'overbearing' male bosses, sometimes 'flirtatious' male mentors who tend to see women as sex objects. Although, a higher number of respondents (48.5%) assumed that lack of interest and enthusiasm do not affect women career development but also reasonable responses claimed otherwise.

The two positions in issues relating to non-supportive spouse and unable to balance works with family responsibility (B9) surprisingly received moderate ranking. These findings indicated that (41.5%) and (41.6%) of the respondents recognize the family and work conflicts and claimed women can combine works and family responsibilities without any conflicts. Lingard et al. (2007) posit from what led to the moderate responses that men do believe that work-family issues only relate to women, they are also seriously impacted by work-family issues (Lingard et al., 2007). Besides, women experience more work-family conflicts because of the responsibility of child bearing. Lingard

and Lin (2004) assert women who expect to balance both family and career success in the construction industry may experience significant difficulties, while Okafor and Amayo's (2006) study on work-family conflicts indicated that the conflict between work and family responsibilities had become a source of concern for both organizations and individuals.

Table 3: Results on Factors Affecting Women Career in Construction Management

Rank	Issues	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
B1	Advanced education and specialized training facilitate women career	82.2	12.9
B2	Work experience enhances women career growth	81.1	12.9
B3	Professional membership aids women career advancement	68.4	18.8
B4	Taking greater business risk enhances career development	79.2	13.9
B5	Right informal connections aid women career advancement	56.4	24.8
B6	Lack of confidence and timidity impede women career	58.4	43.6
B7	Lack of female role models hinders women career development	56.4	31.7
B8	Lack of interest and enthusiasm affect women career development	36.7	48.5
B9	Non-supportive spouse and unable to balance works with family responsibility	41.5	41.6

Source: Field Survey, 2012

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research found that some of the barriers evidenced in the literature against women career advancement in construction are prevalent in the developing economy of Nigeria. However, the existence of equality in respect of male and female in terms of employment requirements and career development opportunity seem to be an exception. The barriers against women participation in construction industry have their roots in choice of course of education and blossom throughout recruitment and career progression. Based on the findings, to encourage women participation in construction, the male-only image of the industry should be de-emphasized and equal gender image should be focused so as to attract and retain talented women. The gender bias in education, training and recruitment exercise should be improved by genuine provision of adequate career guidance towards

construction related occupations and seeking women for job opportunities. Also, the industry should improve the environmental factors by introducing flexible work hour, reducing workload and making the works less tedious and stressful. The construction companies should have policies that respect the dignity of women by discouraging the use of foul languages and harassment and continually support them to balance work and family responsibilities.

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