Factors affecting women in acquiring leadership positions in workplaces: A human resource management perspective

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Abstract: Under-representation of women in leadership positions in the corporate world has been a global concern. Scholars have explored many institutional barriers that women face in climbing the career ladder with limited studies assessing HR related factors. This study intended to assess HR related factors that affect women progressing to leadership positions in organizations, with specific reference to Tanzania. Guided by qualitative approach and human capital theory, the study involved semi-structured interviews to collect data from eight (8) respondents who were sampled by using a purposive sampling technique. The sample included female leaders and HR practitioners from seven (7) organizations in Tanzania. Thematic data analysis was employed. The study found that HR practices play a vital role in enhancing or limiting the number of female employees who reach leadership positions. The study recommends that organizations put in place fair and objective hiring systems that create fair grounds for both male and female employees. Training and development opportunities should be fairly distributed to both female and male employees with consideration that women play multiple leadership roles at home and at work as well. Organizations should consider employee promotion based on merit. Government, through its various agencies, should put in place measures that intend to control practices that discriminate against women, and hinder them from enjoying equal opportunities available at their workplaces.
Key words: Gender equality, leadership, recruitment, selection, human resource management

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the number of women working in the corporate world has increased. The concern, however, has been the under-representation of women holding leadership positions (Tahir, Ullah, Ahmad, Syed, Qadir, 2021).The under-representation of women in leadership attracts the attention of scholars for various reasons. First and foremost, the idea of what leadership is. Mwakangula and Mwita (2021), for example, define leadership as a process of influencing and inspiring followers to willingly use their knowledge, skills and expertise to achieve group or organizational goals. Based on this perspective of leadership, it is reasoned that a leader needs special attributes to successfully execute leadership to followers. The question, at this point, could be whether women lack some leadership qualities to qualify for leadership positions as their male counterparts. Informed of this question, some scholars attribute the under-representation of women to lack of ability to qualify for leadership positions or existence of other factors that restrict them from smooth career progression like their male counterparts (Babic & Hansez, 2021; Mamizade & Golabi, 2014; Akpinar-Sposito, 2013). Literature, however, underscores the need for skills development as a condition for acquiring leadership positions. It is reasoned in many studies that when women are equipped with relevant knowledge, skills and other leadership competencies they can perform relatively better than men in managerial positions (Brue & Brue, 2021; Hopkins, O'Neil, Passarelli & Bilimoria, 2008).

A number of global, regional and local initiatives have been put in place to ensure that women have equal chances to ascend to the top of their careers and assume decision making roles. ILO (2020) reports that the number of women holding managerial positions has been significantly increasing. While the increase of the number of women

has been noted, there are disparities in terms of pace across different parts of the world (Salloum & Azzi, 2016). Comparatively, the number of women holding leadership positions in the developed countries is relatively higher than in the developing countries (Ahmed, Uddin, Ashikuzzaman, & Khan, 2016).

Global agencies such as the United Nations (UN), International Labour Organization (ILO), among others, have been proponents of equal employment chances across all career opportunities (ILO, 2016). Some countries, in support of the agencies, have put in place legal frameworks that offer equal employment opportunities in quest to address gender discrimination. Further, affirmative practices that focus on increasing the number of women in organizations in general and in managerial positions in particular have also been taken across the continents (Furtado, Moreira, & Mota, 2021; Kurtulus, 2016).

In Tanzania, as in other parts of the developing world, women are significantly under-represented across all sectors (IFC, 2021; Msoka & Muya, 2019). Even in sectors that are dominated by females such as education and training, males dominate leadership positions (Salum, 2020). In order to understand the rationale behind women minority in leadership positions, scholars and practitioners have identified factors associated with the situation. While studies highlight social-cultural, political and economic perspectives as some of the factors (Mutaburukwa & Mazana, 2017), literature on factors related to human resource management practices is scarce. Human resource management means a strategic approach to ensure that organizations acquire, develop and utilize individuals effectively and efficiently to reach organizational goals. The management of human resources, in this regard, determines how an individual ascends to hold managerial

or leadership position in an organization (Stamarski & Hing, 2015). This study sought to understand how selected human resource management practices contribute to women holding managerial positions in Tanzania.

Objectives of the Study

The study intended to achieve the following objectives;

General Objective

The study sought to assess how human resource management practices affect women acquiring leadership positions in workplaces

Specific Objectives

1. To examine how hiring practices affect women in acquiring leadership positions at workplaces
2. To assess how training and development affect women in acquiring leadership positions in workplaces
3. To assess how promotion practices affect women in the acquisition of leadership positions in workplaces

LITERATURE REVIEW

Human Capital Theory

This study is grounded on Human Capital Theory (HCT). The theory was originally proposed by Schultz (1961) and was later developed by Becker (1993) and Mincer (1974). Although HCT is underpinned in economics, its application has gained popularity in different fields including human resource management (Perepelkin, Perepelkina & Morozova, 2016). Human capital theory postulates that investing in training and education leads to job creation, earnings and speedier transitions to enhanced career prospects (Raffiee & Coff, 2016). This implies that people who get

access to education are more likely to progress career-wise and possibly hold leadership positions. Buta (2015) argues that Human Capital Theory is useful in explaining how organizations attract, maintain, develop and reward human resources. The theory is applicable in this study since it has to do with hiring, developing and career advancement of women. The argument of this study is that investing in women skills, knowledge and competences will eventually increase their performance and hence increase their chances of succeeding in their careers.

Hiring practices effect on the acquisition of leadership positions by women

Recruitment and selection is a major practice in hiring employees. Mwita (2019) argues that in many firms and organizations, the selection of suitable human resources to join organizations is known as entry point. However, the whole process of hiring determines whether organizations open doors for women to join firms or lock chances for them to acquire and hold leadership positions. Moreover, gender discrimination influences the types of occupations that women apply for. Studies show that some organizations prefer male applicants in some occupations hence limit chances of women to be hired (Bertogg, Imdorf, Hyggen, Parsanoglou & Stoilova, 2020).

Studies have consistently shown that males dominate different organizations (Stamarski & Hing, 2015). Personal biases among the hiring officials often victimize women and hence limit their chances of being hired. For instance, wording in job advertisements is said to influence the applicants to develop an attitude on intentions of the employer with regards to gender preference. Adverts with words such as "salesman" rather than "salesperson" create a feeling of gender discrimination and stereotypes which may have a significant influence on whether a female job candidate will apply for the post or not (Kay, 2011). In breaking the gender

stereotypes, and hence increasing the number of female employees at work, organizations may use job adverts with words which are not gender suggestive (Kuhn & Shen, 2010). Encouraging women to apply for a particular position communicates the intention of the recruiter to have a workplace that is diverse in terms of gender. Considering the leadership roles for women, by implication, organizations that have more women are more likely to have more female leaders than those that do not.

Some organizations commit to creating a gender fair hiring practice for managerial and non-managerial positions through developing HR policies that aimtot promote positive discrimination in hiring (Matotoka & Odeku, 2021). In Tanzania, the legal framework forbids employers to discriminate against women in employment opportunities and there are affirmative practices that are encouraged in order to increase the number of women in organizations.

Training and development effect on acquisition of leadership positions by women

Employee training entails a systematic planned process intending to equip an individual with relevant knowledge and skills to perform specific tasks. On the other hand, development is a holistic and long term approach focusing on improving thinking and behavioral aspects of an individual as a means to prepare him/her to perform strategic roles of an organization. Skills, knowledge and experience are important factors for people to succeed in their career journeys (Hedge & Rineer, 2017). They are a key for one to have qualifications for holding leadership positions in the corporate world. Sadly, not all people access these opportunities for their career growth (Tiandani & Anggriani, 2015).

It has been argued that lack of necessary skills and experience denies women access to managerial or leadership positions. Failure to possess these qualifications has been attributed to factors that are mainly social. There is a contention that even when women in workplaces are offered career growth opportunities they fail to utilize them because of the work-life imbalance existing (Sadikhov, 2021). Unlike their male counterparts, females have to do other domestic responsibilities that limit them to utilize available career opportunities. Giving birth and other post natal commitments make it difficult for many women who wish to climb career ladders and reach at the top.

While, in this case, training and development could suitably prepare women for leadership positions, stereotypes and discrimination against women in the work place denies most women of the opportunities for training and development plans (Khan, Rainayee, Gull, 2019). Kossel and Buzzanel (2018) contends that organizations with sound training and development policies that embrace equal employment opportunity have succeeded in developing more female leaders than those without. In view of this, training and development practices may either promote or stop women from achieving their career goals and consequently holding leadership positions in organizations. In a situation where women have not been provided with enough training to develop their leadership potential, it is undeniable that they are less likely to be recognized and offered opportunities to assume decision making roles in firms (Minasyan, 2020).

Promotion practices effect on acquisition of leadership positions by women

Most leadership positions in organizations are acquired through promotion. Promotion is the transfer of an employee to a higher position in wages, responsibilities and/or organizational levels (Razak, Sarpan&Ramlan, 2018). Those who seem to have relevant

qualifications stand a better chance to be promoted to hold leadership positions in an environment where principles of fairness and objectivity are exercised (Yamini, Sakawati & Putri, 2019). Comparatively, women who get promoted to leadership positions are fewer in number than men (Tahir, Ullah, Ahmad, Syed, Qadir, 2021).

Some studies highlight that lack or inadequacy of required qualifications impede female employees from acquiring leadership positions. Available empirical evidence, however, shows that institutional factors play a major role in denying women promotion opportunities. The study of Mamizade and Golabi (2014), for example, points out that management teams in some organizations do not equally trust women in leadership and therefore reduce their chances of holding leadership positions. Moreover, female employees have limited access to informal information networks that are important in organizational promotion.

Promotion practices may limit women from acquiring leadership positions based on the demands of the leadership roles they are expected to play. As noted by Sadikhov (2021), globalization has established an additional barrier for women to get leadership promotion. The leadership positions in our fast paced world require higher flexibility and non-stop focus on the business. In addition, top leaders ought to travel and accept possible relocation to other geographical locations. These demands may make it difficult for female employees in male-dominated societies to get promoted since women have a bigger portion in handling domestic activities at home such as taking care of children and families at large.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study used phenomenology research design to capture meaning that participants make with regard to determinants of women inclusion in leadership positions. The choice of the design was based on the fact that the study sought to obtain in-depth information on the research phenomena and provide highly novel insights (Kindsiko & Poltimae, 2019). Purposive sampling was used to obtain a sample size of 8 respondents. The study used semi-structured interviews for data collection. Saturation was used as a criterion of the number of respondents and the number of the interviews. Saturation refers to a criterion used to decide on the sufficiency of data to achieve research objectives and therefore discontinue collecting more data (Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020). Respondents were divided into two categories; five(5) women holding leadership positions from the level of Head of Department (HOD) and three (3) Human Resource Management practitioners. The sample was drawn using a purposive sampling technique from seven (7) different organizations located in Tanzania which are Mzumbe University, Mzumbe Primary school, Mvumi Mission Primary School, Bukoba Municipal Council, Morogoro Municipal Council, Barrick Gold Mine and Top Target Limited. HR practitioners were included to provide insights on HR practices and the likelihood of women acquiring leadership positions in their respective firms. The use of different firms intended to obtain data from different organizations in order to obtain common practices and themes in varied organizations. The study adopted thematic data analysis. Thematic analysis is the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). In the analysis, the focus was on identifying most repeated themes as respondents shared. On average, interviews lasted for 46 minutes.

Table1: Sample characteristics

Organization/type of respondent	Mzumbe University	Mzumbe Primary School	Mvumi Mission Primary School	Bukoba Municipal Council	Morogoro Municipal Council	Barrick Gold Mine	Top Target Limited
Female leaders	2	1	1	1	-		
HR practitioners	-	-	-	-	1	1	1
Total	**2**	**1**	**1**	**1**	**1**	**1**	**1**

N=8
Source: Researchers' field data, 2022

STUDY FINDINGS

Hiring Practices and leadership position acquisition by women

The study sought to find how hiring practices facilitate or hinder women's progression to leadership positions. In achieving this end, the study assessed how hiring practices determine the number of female employees who get employed in different firms for managerial and non-managerial positions. The study found that hiring practices play a significant role in increasing or reducing the number of female employees who join organizations. It was employers and/or recruiters' decision about who to hire that determined whether a male or a female prospective employee had to be employed.

The study further found that some organizations have positions or occupations that employers consider to be specific for males only. Sexism and gender stereotypes among employers inhibited women from being employed or promoted for leadership or managerial positions. Perceptions that some employers have towards women scare some women to apply for leadership positions even when they have relevant qualifications. Bertogg, *et al,* (2020) reported similar findings that some employers would prefer male job applicants in some positions.

In justifying gender stereotypes in the recruitment stage, one of the respondents reported that some recruiters would be in favour of the male job applicants on the argument that the roles for the position are too demanding hence men would be the best fit. Sadikhov (2021) in his study raises a similar argument on the issue of gender biased job demands, to justify gender favoritism. He argues that women cannot afford a high demanding work environment such as frequent travel for individuals holding managerial positions. This attitude, the study found, exists in Tanzania as well. Although employers are aware of the law and hiring principles, they do not communicate their stereotypes in the advertisements to avoid legal consequences. It was found that in some cases, organizations may shortlist job applicants regardless of gender to comply with legal requirements only to select their favored gender as the process completes. The

result is, more women are barred from getting employed and holding leadership positions from this practice.

Moreover, the study also found that women assume multiple roles at home and at work. On the basis of their commitment to domestic duties, some employers believe that managerial positions are burdens to women. One of the female leaders interviewed explained that there are cases that when recruiters find out that a job applicant, with relevant qualifications and experience, is pregnant they may decide against her application. It appears that employers are concerned about gender specific rights, such as maternity leave, which may cost the employer in different ways. On whether recruiters consider that women are less competent than their male counterparts in executing various tasks in organizations all HRs interviewed disagreed. One of the HR explained,

'In hiring we are more keen on whether a candidate can do the job and we do not associate competences with gender. However, there are very few people [HRs] who still have that mentality but hiring processes in most organizations are not handled by a single person; it is a decision that is made by a number of people something that limits bias in hiring decisions'

The above quotation gives an impression that recruiters do not doubt women's competences as such but are concerned about issues related to work-life balance. It is against this belief that hiring processes that involve multiple people (recruiters) may be useful in addressing biases against women.

Deliberate affirmative policies and practices incorporated in hiring to increase the number of women in organizations were found to contribute to addressing the under-representation of women. An example of such

practices and policies is including expressions such as "women are encouraged to apply" in job adverts. One of the HRs interviewed explained that such expressions invite a bigger number of female applicants and, as a result, increases chances of a woman to be hired. Organizations with these practices tend to attract more women in their advertised positions and they tend to feel more secure. Moreira and Mota (2021) and Kurtulus (2016) make similar assertions.

Training and development and acquisition of leadership positions by women

Training and development programmes are a key for people to progress to leadership positions. In a situation where a woman is less qualified for new hire or promotion to leadership, training and development programmes provide prerequisite qualifications for the positions. In exploring the need for skills development through training, each respondent of the study was asked whether women are provided with similar training and development opportunities as those provided to their male counterparts. It was found that women are offered similar opportunities. However, it was revealed that men are more likely to benefit from those programmes. Among many reasons that hinder women from attending training programmes is family responsibilities especially for married women. While this could be understood in the context of Tanzanian culture, it seriously puts women in a less advantaged position since training is important for one to acquire necessary skills to ascend to leadership positions. Sadikhov (2021) demonstrated that work-life balance stops women from utilizing training opportunities offered in their respective organizations.

In order to understand what is done to help women that cannot attend long term training programmes, the study found that in most organizations attending long term training is

often not compulsory. One of the HRs commented that,

'there are training sessions that are sometimes mandatory for each employee to attend when offered and in most cases are those that are offered onsite. However, for a person to go for a master's degree is something that you cannot force a person to do and the experience shows that men tend to use these opportunities whenever they emerge unlike women. There are cases where a woman is denied permission by her husband to go for further studies'

The participant quoted above suggests that while equal training opportunities in the organization may be ideal, women may encounter other out-of-the-organization challenges that restrict them from participation. In view of such challenges, organizations, according to one of the participants, should prepare training programmes that accommodate special needs of women to encourage women to make use of available training opportunities.

With regard to distribution of employee development opportunities, the findings are different. It was found that development opportunities such as job rotation, transfer to places with more responsibilities, delegation and others tend to benefit male employees more than female employees and hence leave women with less experience behind and holding fewer managerial positions. Female leaders interviewed admitted that men are more likely to be delegated with decision making roles than female employees. Moreover, discrimination of women in development opportunities have been common is many organizations as noted by Khan, Rainayee and Gull (2019).

The study found that most organizations do not have clear development programmes and therefore employee development tends to take place without a clear strategy. This makes it difficult for organizations to cater for women's development needs sincethey face many institutional barriers to succeed in career progression. One of the respondents commented that,'the reason why women are not offered with enough development opportunities is low trust that those holding senior positions have to female employees. From my experience when senior leaders travel, they rarely give women opportunities to act on their behalves even when they are capable to assume those responsibilities'

The above quotation shows that leadership experiences that women have to acquire through assuming responsibilities as part of development plans are limited and therefore reduces chances of women to progress in their careers. With this regard, development programmes that are gender sensitive could be a solution. As human capital theory argues, training and development are determinants of career success therefore access of women to these opportunities is important to help them acquire leadership roles.

Promotion practices and acquisition of leadership positions by women

In assessing promotion practices the study firstly sought to understand criteria that are used for promotion decisions. The study found that experiences, performance appraisal results and other personal attributes (such as confidence, interpersonal skills, etc) are used as criteria for promoting employees. The question, however, would be whether women and men equally acquire these necessary prerequisites for one to be promoted to leadership positions. It was found that working experience posed no significant difference, but rather leadership experience that is acquired through delegation of decision making roles. One of the respondents explained that,

"…we are not trusted enough to be delegated some leadership roles, this limits opportunities to develop our leadership potential. Once you are given these roles you get exposed to various important professional networks, information and prove to people that you can handle them effectively. It is not that we are not given these opportunities, what I am stressing is, we are not offered as our male counterparts are…"

The above response signifies that offering women with decision making roles help them to develop their leadership roles and prepare them for more leadership roles through promotion. It must be noted that women do not have obvious access to these roles.

Also, the study sought to understand whether performance of women is assessed fairly compared to their male counterparts to help them to be promoted easily. Dividing and contradicting opinions were found. Some respondents, for instance, believed that their gender has no influence on how supervisors appraise their performance. However, some had a feeling that they are not fairly assessed on the basis of their gender. Lack of consensus on this is perhaps due to the fact that respondents had different experiences from different supervisors and organizations. The thesis, however, is that some supervisors demonstrate gender stereotypes which exert some negative effect on women when it comes to promoting them to leadership roles.

On the contrary, the study found that men are more likely to be promoted to leadership positions even when they possess equal or lesser qualifications than women. One of the respondents working in a primary school had this narrative,

"…it is surprising how promotion works. In our schools there are more female than male teachers and I am very sure there are so many female

teachers that are willing and able to execute leadership roles but you can't believe that there are more male than female head teachers despite the fact that they [male teachers] are minority in the sector."

On probing why this is the case, the study found different reasons. One, lack of men's trust in women to assume leadership roles has been cited as a major reason. Mamizade and Golabi (2014) made similar observations on the same. Second, it is this assumption that work-life imbalance may affect women's commitment and dedication to leadership roles. When these two beliefs are coupled with the belief that women cannot lead men, since men are naturally superior and leaders, the opportunities for women in leadership positions becomes a myth to defeat.

CONCLUSION

This study intended to assess HR related factors that affect women progress to leadership positions in organizations with specific reference to Tanzania. Three selected HR practices which are hiring, training and development and promotion were studied. The study concludes that the hiring process plays a significant role in determining women's progress to leadership positions. More employers may not admit this but they have men in mind as they think of whom to fill in vacant leadership posts. Further, training and development affect women career progression and limits their chances to hold leadership positions since women do not have an easy access to them as their male counterparts. Promotion practices and policies in organizations are often in favor of male employees due to a myth that men can better execute leadership roles than women. The study confirms the human capital theory that investing in people at work in terms of training and development increases their chances of progressing and succeeding in their career.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusion, the study recommends the following;

First and foremost, organizations should consider putting in place fair and objective hiring systems that create fair grounds for both male and female employees. Monitoring and evaluation systems should be used to oversee how recruitment and selection is done to avoid biased decisions in the process. This should go hand in hand with complying with legal requirements that are in place forbidding gender discrimination in places of work.

Similarly, training and development opportunities should be fairly distributed to both female and male employees. Female employees have the right to utilize available training and development opportunities in their respective organizations in order to unleash their leadership and management potentials. Training and development programmes should cater for special women development needs taking into consideration that job and non-job related responsibilities affect women more than men.

Furthermore, organizations should consider executing employee promotion functions based on merit. The fact that there is no empirical evidence that is in favor of men in executing leadership, organizations should find best ways to utilize leadership talents and potential of both male and female employees. Creating a fair ground for workers to compete for leadership positions could also be ideal.

Lastly and importantly, the government should look for measures to control HR practices that discriminate against women in enjoying various opportunities provided in workplaces. This should be supplemented with deliberate efforts to ensure that all employees, regardless of gender, enjoy equal employment opportunities in the country.

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