

Barriers Facing Women Managers to Reach at Higher Levels in Mauritius.

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to determine the barriers that women managers face to climb the hierarchical ladder. Several factors which hamper women managers to progress in their career have been identified. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 10 women managers. They were both from the public and private sectors in Mauritius, occupying different managerial jobs. Despite the fact that women managers are well qualified, the research identifies that they are unable to reach to top positions. This is due to male bias, stereotyping and the cultural phenomenon which favour men to occupy such positions. With limited number women managers' participation, this work cannot be generalised. Future research is needed to analyse other potential barriers which women managers face to reach to top positions. An equal gender policy could be applied to have an adequate representation of women at top level management.

Keywords: Women managers, Barriers, Career

1.0 Introduction

Traditionally, society believed that women should stay at home. As a rule of thumb, women would work after completing their education, marry at a very young age, raise children and may or may not enter the workforce. Due to the industrial revolution, women as homemakers have entered the workforce massively to become the breadwinners of the family. The role of women changed from the private to public sphere; they have progressed considerably and contributed to the economic development. Stereotypes and male-bias have been reduced and society today welcome women to work and be independent. Even though, women have been able to become decision makers which were previously 'reserved' for men. It has been a long journey to see women today as managers (Kazmi and Sharma, 2013). Access to education and training has helped women enormously to aspire jobs till management level.

2.0 Materials and Methods

Some background knowledge is important for better understandings the barriers which are faced by women. Due to education, experiences, training, and perseverance, women have quite progressed in their career. Additionally, the literature deals with factors which hamper women managers to further climb the corporate ladder. It is argued that their representation of are very low at top management positions compared to men. This is due to gender stereotyping and male-bias which are culturally ingrained in society.

2.1 Patriarchal Environment

According to Lerner (1986), patriarchy is the "manifestation and institutionalisation of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general". It differs from one society to another. Women in advanced countries like the United States, Canada, and England are found to be fewer patriarchs than the less advanced countries like Bangladesh and the African countries. Hence, feminists tend to reduce the level of patriarchy and create a society with greater women's participation and substantive equality between male and female (Farrelly, 2011).

Patriarchy had been initially created by the division of labour whereby women were fully engaged in mothering, and that was necessary for group survival (Lerner 1986, cited in Farrelly, 2011). Women have to face different unwritten social norms in a male-dominated society (Omair, 2008). Patriarchy is directed by male domination which is not necessary by coercion. It might be the through institutional settings. In a patriarchal society, men are seen as decision makers whereby women are considered as subordinates (Eboiyehi et al. 2016).

Man's authority can be assumed as the main obstacle to females growing to top positions in organizations. Traditional sexual roles which are ingrained in humanity are also obstacles to women workforce (Fallahi, Mehrad, and Rahpaymaelizehee, 2015). The main source of patriarchy is the norm where men consider himself as superior than females. Patriarchal values are deep-rooted at societal level which is like the tip of the iceberg whereby the hidden part is invisible. This reflects at the higher level of management. Men have ravished this position, and greater support is given to him. Females are generally found as subordinates to their counterparts to keep man leadership in power (Wirth, 2009).

2.2 Women in organisations

Some decades back, there has been a numerous growth of women professionals and managers who are highly skilled in different organizations. Since the last 50 years, women have massively entered employment into the job market (Saadin; Ramli; Johari; Harin, 2015). Women account almost half of the total population worldwide, but they are not equally represented as their male counterparts at the managerial level. They are still remote from the equal privileges which are required to gain access to higher level positions (Moreno-Romero; Carrasco-Gallego, 2012). Globally, the percentage of women in senior levels is growing slowly. At this little pace, the parity with men would not be reached for decades. There has been an increase for women senior roles of only 3% from 2011. In 2016, women at senior management levels were estimated at 24% (Catalyst, 2017).

Women managers 'normally' prefer to be concentrated in lower management positions with fewer responsibilities. The actual position of many women in organisations is still focused on traditionally 'female' functional areas such as clerks, administration, school teachers, organisational communications, governmental relations marketing and finance. Although less emphasis is placed on career progression than men, there are a lot of women who are striving to be at top management level, but are unable to reach it (Akpinar-Sposito, 2013).

Women's success to the top level is uncommon (Virakul, 2000; Yukongdi, 2009). In general, barriers to women's career progression in organizations could be considered as the old-boy networks, male bias and stereotyping, negative perceptions of females at the managerial level and a lack of assertiveness (Brownell and Walsh, 2008, cited in Sok and al, 2011). There is a tendency that women place less emphasis on their career success than men, yet some of them struggle for top management positions but are unable to attain same. Powell and Butterfield (2015) are of the view that societal, organisational and individual factors are the major contributors which have blocked women to progress at climb the corporate ladder.

However, the presence of female staff in managerial positions is visible compared to women as housewives of the 1960s (Schwanke, 2013). The literature review reveals that family, societal and organisational factors have an impact on the professional careers of women (Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989). Addition to these factors, personal traits, corporate networking and management support also have an impact on women's career. Hence, these factors cannot be considered in isolation as they, in turn, affect one another (Fagenson, 1990).

2.3 Women's career

Traditionally, career is defined as a systematic order of development over a period and gradually having more responsibilities within an occupation (Mavin, 2000). Societal changes are remarkably affecting work-life, for example, discontinuity in careers. Hence, the traditional understanding of a career as a life-long process of work-related activities with upward mobility is under challenge (Hall, 2002).

The end of the agricultural economy in most newly industrialized and developed countries was marked by the industrial revolution in the 19th century. The family was a dominant social institution, and it was seen that young people followed the pace of their parents and inherited their careers from the same. In those days, career success was determined by the physical power to the norm of hard work and ethical behaviour (Savickas, 2000). However, the emergence of industrialisation was characterized by the introduction of tall organisational structure (bureaucracy) offering careers for life.

Since the typical bureaucratic system was of different layers, career implied vertical mobility through “*a succession of related jobs, arranged in a hierarchy of prestige*” (Wilensky, 1961, cited in Dries, 2011). However, career success was measured through potential achievements such as income, position and status which are the result of upward advancement on the corporate ladder. After the 1970s, there was a transformation in society through internationalisation and, hence, globalization. Today, with the widespread of organizational restructuring (flatter organisations), the settings of the traditional organizational career are reaching to an end (Savickas, 2000).

Women’s careers in organizations face more obstructions and interruptions, and thus their career paths often differ from those of men (Burke and Mattis, 2007). Apart from working in the office, women have additional responsibilities such as childbearing and giving care to their family. Being female can still be characterised as a major obstacle to career progression into top management positions in many organizations. Senior managerial positions are traditionally held by older-grey hair men, and many women’s careers stagnate at middle management level at an early stage (Jyrkinen, 2013).

Throughout history, the limited presence of women managers has been extensively explained. It is argued that men channel their leadership towards more task-centered which is more visible and formal whereas women tend to be more people-centred that focus on the relationship, emotion and support (Rincón *et al.* 2017).

2.4 Women’s limited career paths

It is somehow hard for women when they develop their careers. Men do not face such difficulties as women when they join the workforce to have a career path. Women have had traditionally poorly managed careers because they had to give way and respect their spouse careers. Indeed, they have to take the responsibility of their family and home and have been subject to male prejudices. In fact, women had limited opportunities concerning their career, thus focusing on the actual intrinsic rewards of the task rather than the long-term benefit (Marshall, 1993).

According to Larwood and Gutek (1987), they present the fact which separate men and women in their career. Women are said to face the tug of different choices, for instance, they suggest that if the career of a woman is being stagnated, she may leave her work and start founding a family. Such possibility is very rare for men as they were for a long time the breadwinner of the family.

Flanders (1994) stated that *when it comes to promotion and career development, women are judged not so much on their abilities and achievements, but on assumptions about their family life, responsibilities and future intentions. Men are treated as workers, not parents, but women are always seen as mothers.*

2.5 Barriers affecting women’s career progression

In the world of work, organisations are intending to keep on to their best and brightest women. But the existence of barriers such as prejudices against women and the “glass ceiling” phenomenon make it difficult for them to achieve higher positions (Ismail and Ibrahim, 2008). In developed societies, the women’s integration in the job market has increased over the past twenty years, and even though they have progressed tremendously in their careers as professionals and managers. In developing countries, however, women have got entry into the managerial ranks at a lower rate. Some researchers argue that the participation of women in the labour market is associated with the reduction of inequality and gender stereotyping. Others are of the view that the progress of women in organisations, in the developing countries, is attributed to access to higher education (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011).

Women participation in the workforce has increased in the developing countries, but they fail to reach successfully at the same grades as men. Barriers such as gender disparities continue to occur and this has kept women to be stuck at the bottom management levels in their organizations (Metcalf, 2006, 2007, 2008; Moghadam, 2004, cited in Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011). The majority of women in those developing societies who are aspiring to further progress in their career are also blocked by the traditional family and work-related issues.

According to Adler & al. (1993, cited in Jogulu and Wood, 2011), the managerial careers of women are less successful than men. This shows that women managers come across various barriers that hamper them to further progress at higher levels in their place of work. Scholars have identified several barriers which women face that limit their contributions (Burke and Nelson, 2002). These are negative attitudes from their male and female colleagues, lack of career development, lack of organizational support, work and family challenges and the old boy network. Therefore, these can be categorized into three dimensions such as:

- (i) Societal barriers;
- (ii) Family barriers; and
- (iii) Organisational barriers.

2.5.1 Societal barriers

Generally, barriers which women faced are found in society. The roles and expectations that are produced and developed within a particular society are religion, beliefs, values, politics, culture and legislation (Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989, cited in Yukongdi, 2009). Societal barriers are related to traditional values, religious beliefs toward women, including gender role stereotyping (Yukongdi, 2009). Over the last decades, the participation of women has risen in the work domain, but their domestic responsibilities have not decreased (Eagly and Sczesny, 2009).

2.5.2 Family barriers

The basic function of a housewife is understood to be traditionally feminine (Mc Dermott, 1998). Ann defines housewife as “the person in a household who is mainly responsible for domestic duties” (Oakley, 1972). Normally, women are expected to be docile, caring about their spouse, children and elders. So, it is obvious that sexual division of labour in the families consider women as mothers and their roles expectations differ from their husband. Men can easily go away from the family situation to the labour market, mainly to have pathways in their career and to fulfil the requirements to be at higher levels in the organisations, leaving their wives to cater for the family as women are linked to reproduction and mothering (Jogulu and Wood, 2011). Having fewer family responsibilities, men can concentrate on developing talents and skills in the organisational world (Fagenson, 1990, cited in Jogulu and Wood, 2011). In the public sphere, priority has continued to be in favour of men where masculine attributes are of great values and feminine attributes are devalued (Gherardi, 1994, cited in Jogulu and Wood, 2011).

2.5.3 Organisational barriers

Organisational factors including policies, practices, structure and culture influence an individual behaviour. Countries with high power distance tend to have a greater acceptance of gender inequality (Hofstede, 1993). This disparity between male and female employees is visible in the workplace. It is hard for men to adjust their paradigm and accept female colleagues holding the same position of power as themselves (Yukongdi, 2009).

The female workforce at lower and middle management has been increased constantly compared to some decades back but this tendency does not happen for higher positions. The under- representation of women at these key positions has been attributed to some invisible barriers termed as the ‘glass ceiling’ (Kiaye and Singh, 2013). Research has shown that glass ceiling including organisational structures, policies and practices have blocked the entry for women to inner circles of organisational leadership (Eagly and Carli, 2007). These structural factors represent huge barriers for women to climb the corporate ladder.

According to Alimo-Melcalfe (2010), the underrepresentation of women at senior level positions in organisations is not specific to a particular country or culture. This appears to be a worldwide phenomenon. The disparity is ingrained in the cultural beliefs surrounding gender and organisational structures and which give priority to men to be in leadership positions (Treasurer et al., 2013, cited in Baker, 2014). Despite Adler’s (1993) statement mentioning that there were very fewer women in management some decades back, this trend has not even changed today. There is still little progression for women in leadership positions.

There are a few women who are represented at the top positions. Regarding upward mobility, stereotyping continues to affect these women. Institutional patriarchy is still disturbing women’s abilities whereby few or no women are seen at top levels (Kanter, 1977, cited in O’Neil and Bilimoria, 2005). This disparate phenomenon hampers the advancement of women into senior positions.

2.6 Prejudices against women in organisations

Prejudice can be defined as a negative attitude towards others based on prejudice and that are not based on reason or experience. In post-modern industrial society, prejudices toward women in organisations have decreased. But they still exist for women at higher positions. These are stereotypes, tokenism, seductress, sexism and framing women as less capable to men (Simpson, 1997, cited in Schwanke, 2013).

As recent challenges to limited career path for women (Alfred et al., 1996), the traditional male career system has remained as a normal standard for judging career advancement.

Males and females are described as two distinct qualities, namely 'communal' and 'agentic'. Communal qualities are mostly associated with women including affection and gentleness whereas agentic traits are associated with men including assertiveness and control. These prejudices have come from socialisation process and which reflect in the workplace. Therefore, at management level, men are deemed to be in these positions, leaving their female counterparts to their stagnated positions and to work through external perceptions (Eagly and Sczesny, 2009).

Additionally, women have a low profile in organisations because of age, gender and 'lookism' (Jyrkinen, 2014). Ageism refers to negative stereotyping and discrimination which is normally based on older age and these results on prejudices and myths. Gendered ageism is not limited to relations between both genders, but also manifests between women as well as between men. Gender and age have both positive and negative impacts on women managers' perceptions of career development.

2.7 Methods

This section will discuss the research methodology that was used to conduct this study. It aims to identify the potential barriers which women managers face in their career reaching to senior level positions. Therefore, an effective research approach was needed to help the researcher in conducting the research. A qualitative study has been carried out to address some questions which have been derived from the aim of this work. This was followed by sub-questions as have been stated in **Table 1**.

Research that depends on rich qualitative data is becoming more popular whereby the outcome might be fresh (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). A qualitative study provides depth and details compared to a quantitative one which measures and evaluates the reactions of a number of respondents through a limited set of questions and answers. According to Patton (2002), a qualitative study cannot reach the same breadth as the quantitative research.

Qualitative approach is largely exploratory in nature and descriptive rather than explanatory, therefore it allows the researcher to describe the experiences of the participants. Through this method, the researcher could obtain profound information for the research questions which would not be possible by using questionnaire, as in quantitative research, with predetermined answer categories. Qualitative method was deemed important to be used by the researcher to reveal valuable attitudes and perspectives where an intensive dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee could be present. This would not be possible through a quantitative one (Broda, 2006). The descriptive nature of qualitative research could enable any reader to understand the meaning of the experiences, the defining nature of the problem and the impact of the problem (Meyer, 2001).

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 10 women managers. The respondents came from different functional backgrounds such as human resource department, general administration, marketing fields and other related functional fields. **Table 2** illustrates the demographic profile of the respondents.

According to Floyd and Wooldridge (1992), a manager is '*The coordination of an organizational unit's day-to-day activities with the activities of vertically related groups*'. This level ranges from top management and the first level of supervision. Additionally, managers act as organisational agents who link the activities of vertically related groups responsible for at least sub-functional work flow, but not to the work flow of the organisation as a whole.

For this study, the researcher defines 'women managers' as people who are positioned from the first line management level and below top management level of the corporate hierarchy, i.e. they are the link between top management and first-line employees.

As a tool to the data collection, the researcher noted the qualitative responses for each participant in a diary book. The interviews were initially conducted in English, but there were times when participants would use the Creole Language to better express themselves. However, during the interview process, the researcher preferred to note down the responses in Creole Language which were later transcribed into the English Language.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. It was considered simpler than if qualitative software would be used (Gibbs, 2002). This type of analysis allows for flexibility in the researcher's choice of theoretical framework. The meanings that the participants had given to the social world were objectively analysed. The researcher was closed to the primary data through the diary book and revisiting the data as and when required was very helpful during the transcription process. Hence, the data was analysed more profoundly and accurately. Thematic analysis is a method used for 'identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data'.

The reason for choosing this method was that 'rigorous thematic approach could produce an insightful analysis that answers particular research questions' (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

3.0 Results and Discussion

The barriers which are faced by Mauritian women were perceived to be created by societal factors, namely patriarchal environment and family responsibilities. These two themes cropped up from the thematic analysis. To some extent, these factors blocked them to further concentrate in their career compared to men who were at leadership positions in the family and at organisations for a long time. Since the last decades, women have been able to cross this line.

3.1 Patriarchal environment

From a patriarchal viewpoint, women are supposed to keep the household, bring up children, and cater to the needs of the husband. The expectation is that women value their roles as mothers and wives (Littrell and Bertsch, 2013). Safeguarding the family prestige is entrusted to men where they control the female members of the family. Women are generally treated as the minority group or as property regarding their interactions with the society. Men tend to hold the positions of power in important social institutions, e.g. being head of the family and boss at the workplace.

The majority of the respondents were of the view that they still live in subordination. As mentioned by Khushboo:

I still believe that we are living in a patriarchal society because the mindset of men towards women has not changed. Even if people talk about gender equality, I have not seen major differences. I see that women are still being oppressed.

Females are generally found as subordinates to their male counterparts. It can be argued that the main source of patriarchy is upon the norms where men consider themselves as superior to females. Patriarchal values are deep-rooted at societal level which is like the tip of the iceberg whereby the hidden part is invisible (Wirth, 2009). Although there has been an evolution in society, male bias still exists towards women. The environment has always been male-dominated. This phenomenon seems not to change shortly as the following quotes reveal:

From the old ages, women have been the subordinates of men. Today, our living environment has changed. But I still believe that the majority of men view women in a low profile because of their 'incapacity' or lack of certain skills which women do not possess (Priyanka).

Our society has built in a way that men are privileged in almost all areas. There has been an evolution and now women can do the job of men. By trying to imitate the Western countries, the mindset of male bias has reduced to some extent. As several institutions work towards women enhancement and development, in every family there is at least a working women (Sharone).

Schein's (1975) early work argued that the position of a manager was sex-typed as a male occupation. Characteristics such as leadership skills, forcefulness, desiring responsibility, confidence and aggression were often assumed to be in men. Earlier work has been repeated whereby male managers are found to be prevalent towards women in managerial roles (Jogulu and Wood, 2011).

3.2 Family responsibilities

Almost all the participants stated that they have to cater for their families. Women are considered to be polite, docile, patient and caring for their families. Through the sexual division of labour, the roles of women mothers differ from their husband. Usually, men do not cater for the day to day family responsibilities, and they are easily gone away to the labour market to concentrate on their jobs, hence laying more emphasis on their career path. They leave their wives to cater for the family. According to Baldiga (2005), it is argued that married females with children give priority to their families. Jane stated that:

As usual, the basic responsibility of a woman is to look after her family. Although man can do it, he will not have the same feeling and patience such as a woman. I know that my family responsibility blocks me in a way or another to fully concentrate in my professional career. But I try to manage it. As far as possible I try to keep the balance between work and family.

Therefore, it is obvious that the basic responsibility of women is to look after their family. Women have grown in such a way that they are very caring and patient compared to men. Women have to face a lot obstacle, including the production of children, being mothers and wives.

They do the cooking, looking after the elderly, washing and take care of their husband. (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013). It is still a belief that the main roles of women are linked to reproduction and mothering (Jogulu and Wood, 2011). Khushboo also had the same view:

We have to face a lot of burden in our life; reproduction, looking after the children, house chores, etc. These are the basic works of a woman.

During pregnancy, women need sufficient period of maternity leave. Sometimes, they wish to extend this to some more months or years to enable them to spend this precious time with their baby or pre-school child. Thus, returning to work can be a disadvantage for their career path as it becomes difficult for these women to catch up compared to their male counterparts who have a continuous career path way (Steven and al, 2013). Pratima resonates;

I gave birth to my baby and I was very busy looking after him. During the same period, I have interrupted my study for almost 1 year to look after my lovely. Three years later, I was pregnant for my second baby and the same story continued again.

Very often women have to face the pressure of the two distinctive roles; firstly, the role of an employee at work and secondly, a caring mother at home. Thus, work-family conflict arises. Apart from cooking and child care, elderly care is another problem faced by employed women. This inter-role conflict from the work and family has a negative impact on women's career (Kargwell, 2008).

Researchers have argued that gender roles are connected with attributes to individuals in their early childhood where females and males acquired different gender-related attitudes and behaviours. During socialisation process, girls have been learnt to adopt certain behaviours and traits which drive them to perform particular roles, such as domestic responsibilities (Tlaiss and Klauser, 2011). As stated by Priyanka:

I think that the primary role of a woman is to look after her family. Women are the building block of a family; they can construct a happy family or they can destroy a family.

Faranaz also voiced out that

I am single. I live in a family consisting of 4 members; my mother, 2 sisters and myself. I am the eldest child in the family. My younger sister will be getting married soon and I have to take almost all the responsibilities to organize her marriage. The youngest one does not care about the family. Friends, Facebook, TV, cellular phones, games; all these are her passion. I have to bear the family responsibility.

4.0 Conclusion

In this paper, most of the factors identified in the Mauritian context were consistent with the literature. Due to the patriarchal structures, there are gender-role inequities at the workplace. These are connected with the traits attributed to people at their early stages of the socialisation process where boys and girls learned different gender-related attitudes and behaviours (Tlaiss and Klauser, 2011). Females have been grown in ways to adopt and accept certain behaviours such as to be docile, caring and emotionally oriented, thus leaving certain major decisions to men. Due to modernisation and the changing of the traditional role, women have participated in the public domain and have massively contributed to the economic development of our country. Some of them have even progressed into the managerial ranks, which were invisible some decades ago.

4.1 Limitations and implications for future research

This study has been drawn from a small sample size of 10 Mauritian women managers. No generalisations can be made from this work, and therefore further in-depth research on a large scale is required to have a better understanding of the potential barriers which are faced by women managers to reach at higher level in their organisations.

However based on this research, and to improve gender equality, reserved seats for women or corporate gender quotas can be established in organisations. Some European countries, namely Norway, Spain, Iceland, Italy, Finland, France, and the Netherlands have all already passed reforms concerning gender quotas at board level. As women tend to be the caring, docile and patient, they can focus more on the strategic decision of the business. As good listeners and obedient workers, women managers can also solve conflicts and reduce corruption in the workplace.

Organisations can also have more senior leaders to provide mentoring and coaching assistance to potential women who are seeking to be at higher positions. Women who are aspiring to become top leaders can be placed in assessment centres to have a better taste of their future positions. Apart from rigorous networking and providing incentives to women, organisations should prepare women to become managers at the very first stage in their career. This might be through intensive training and encouragement from top management, more precisely from the male managers.

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Table 1: Question

No.	Question
1	<p>What are the barriers faced by women during their career?</p> <p>Sub-question (a): Do the following environmental factors have an impact on your career?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family • Society • Organisation <p>Sub-question (b): Are there any other factors which might prevent women to climb the corporate ladder?</p>

Table 2: Respondents' demographic profile (N=10)

Participants	Occupation	Age range	Length of service	Educational Qualifications	Marital status	Job promotion achieved	No. of children	Child care responsibility	Elder care responsibility
1-Manti	Senior Industrial Property Officer	40-45	16	Postgraduate	married	twice	2	no	no
2-Kushboo	Customer Relations Manager	40-45	15	Undergraduate	married	once	3	yes	no
3-Jane	Operations Manager	35-40	10	Postgraduate	married	once	1	yes	no
4-Anais	Senior Procurement and Supply Officer	45-50	20	Undergraduate	married	once	1	yes	no
5-Pratima	Higher Executive Officer	35-40	17	Undergraduate	married	once	2	yes	no
6-Priyanka	Associate Professor	55-60	30	PhD	married	twice	1	yes	no
7-Sharone	Assistant Human Resource Manager	45-50	21	Postgraduate	divorce	once	1	no	no
8-Kelly	Guest Relations Manager	40-45	24	Diploma	married	no	2	no	no
9-Faranaz	Marketing Manager	30-35	8	Postgraduate	single	once	-	no	yes
10-Jasmine	Communication Manager	35-40	14	Postgraduate	married	once	3	yes	yes