

Women leaders in the workplace:

The intangible barrier

Jane Rarieya takes a closer look at gender equality in South Africa and finds a discrepancy between men and women in labour participation, remuneration and advancement.

The past 20 years of democracy in South Africa have seen significant strides being made to ensure that gender equality has become a societal reality. Indeed, South Africa has received international recognition for these efforts and is currently ranked 16th in the world by the Global Gender Gap Index, a framework used by the World Economic Forum to capture the magnitude and scope of gender-based disparities among countries in the areas of economic participation and opportunity; educational attainment; health and survival; and political empowerment.

The glass ceiling

However, a closer analysis of South Africa's score in the area of economic participation and opportunity reveals disparities regarding gender equality. There appears to be a gap between men and women in labour participation, remuneration and advancement. On this criterion, South Africa's score drops significantly to 69th position, clearly denoting a problem in gender equality in the workplace. This issue is not peculiar to South Africa alone; the 2012 G20 Worldwide Index of Women as Public Sector Leaders demonstrated that while women made up a sizeable percentage of the workforce in most countries, this was not reflected in their representation in leadership.

The 2012-2013 Commission for Employment Equity Annual Report raised some fundamental questions regarding the status of women in the workplace in South Africa. The report indicated that males far outnumbered females at all levels of management in South Africa (Table 1). Further, few women were being promoted to top and senior management levels. Of the total number of people recruited or promoted to top management level, women comprised 22.5% and 30.2% respectively.

Studies have identified three main contributing factors to women's absence in leadership in the workplace, discussed below.

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Table 1: Gender distribution in workplace leadership.

Level: Top management		
Gender	2002	2012
Male	86.2%	80.2%
Female	13.7%	19.8%
Level: Senior management		
Gender	2002	2012
Male	78.5%	69.2%
Female	21.6%	30.1%

Source: Commission for Employment Equity Annual Report 2012-2013.

Structure of leadership paths and positions in organisations

Men's predominance in positions of organisational power, coupled with their well established professional and social network patterns, provide them with greater access to information and support. Women often have difficulty breaking into this professional support system.

Further, the convergence of women's biological and professional clocks, their roles as mothers and the time demands of leadership positions put them at a disadvantage to attaining these positions. Workplaces are increasingly competitive, and this is further exacerbated by the technological advances that enable constant accessibility, blurring the boundaries between work and home.

Although men today assume an increasing share of household responsibilities, women continue to shoulder the major burden. Unlike most male leaders, female leaders lack the support of spouses who are full-time homemakers or who only work part time. Moreover, women with families also face more travel and relocation constraints than similarly situated men, often opting for career breaks as a result.

Perception of women leaders

Traditional societal gender stereotypes pose a fundamental challenge to women in leadership. There is a mismatch between the qualities traditionally associated with leaders and those traditionally associated with women. Assertive and authoritative behaviours that people link with leadership tend not to be viewed as typical or attractive in women. What is deemed assertive in a man appears abrasive in a



woman. Thus, women face trade-offs between competence and likability.

Generally, these challenges result in women dropping off the leadership track or taking lower posts, reinforcing assumptions that women are less committed to their careers and less worthy of training or managing challenging assignments.

The absence of women in leadership positions negatively affects women lower in the organisational ranks. Since feminine attributes appear a hindrance to success they adopt masculinist approaches to leadership, modelled by men.

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Women leaders' self-perception

Many women also internalise societal stereotypes and these create a psychological glass ceiling. They consider themselves less qualified for leadership positions. This lesser sense of entitlement discourages them from engaging in assertive, self-promoting behaviours and from taking risks, which are key leadership traits.

There is a need to ensure gender parity as well as the creation of enabling environments for women to access and stay in leadership.

Further, some women in leadership develop what is often referred to as a 'queen bee syndrome.' They consider their title and status a culmination of an individual struggle, and therefore do not support their female juniors' ascent to leadership.

Women tend to be less aggressive than men in applying for the big jobs they want; only applying if they have all the required papers. When it comes to pay negotiations, they are reluctant to appear aggressive and so lose out on this score too.

The foregoing indicates a need to ensure gender parity as well as the creation of enabling environments for women to access and stay in leadership. A number of recommendations towards this end are deliberated.

Recommended interventions

- A key role in building women's capacity is good quality education that encourages independent, critical thought, fosters self confidence and provides young girls with a vision of their future.
- Address discriminatory practices in recruitment and pay equity, facilitated through the proper enactment of laws against discrimination.
- Career breaks impact negatively on women's leadership aspirations, therefore measures should be instituted to eliminate the adverse impact of career breaks through well-paid leave and right of return to posts.