

# Gender and Women's Leadership Aspirations Within Zimbabwe's Formal Employment Sector A Multisectoral Approach

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## ABSTRACT

This study seeks to contribute to the knowledge gap on the impact of gender on women's leadership aspirations in formal employment across Zimbabwe's financial, educational, agricultural, mining and State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs). It identifies the barriers to women's leadership aspirations; comprehends their coping strategies; identifies the critical success factors and determines the strategies to address the leadership-related challenges faced by formally employed female executives. The pragmatic research philosophy guided this exploratory research which utilised a mixed-method research approach based on questionnaires, interviews and secondary data in the form of company and national gender policies. The researcher targeted a sample of 90 lower, middle and higher-level female employees selected on the basis of non-probability sampling. Data analysis was based on mixed methods of Excel spread sheet and thematic coding while informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity were key ethical considerations. The research established that female executives are subject to societal level barriers, recruitment level barriers, career pipeline barriers and government level barriers in their quest for top leadership. Societal-level barriers encompassed lack of spousal support, triple burden and gender insensitive language while recruitment-level barriers included the gender insensitivity of recruitment committees. Career-pipeline barriers included competition from male jobs seekers, absence of mentorship opportunities, lack of respect and failure to get positive attribution from performance management experts at work. Aspiring females struggled for promotion and were often locked out of informal networks which form the bases of career mobility. The existing gender policies were considered inadequate to cater for the leadership aspirations of women given their generic nature. In coping with these barriers, female executives employed extra help to meet the requirements of the triple burden, formed workplace alliances and adopted masculine traits when the power of persuasion could not win them the loyalty needed to do their work. The female executives also required a range of critical success factors including the ability to communicate and listen effectively, the availability of mentorship opportunities by means of role models, team development, socio-emotional competency, empathy, job competencies. The female executives could also adopt a set of strategies such as lobbying for the repeal of current laws, advocating for affirmative action at work, demanding the appointment of capable female executives, leadership development, education and the setting of own independent standards that should guide female employment trends. The research recommended the government to craft more gender appropriate legislation to promote inclusivity at work while organisations were urged to be more tolerant towards sex differences in their recruitment, selection and promotion at work.

**Keywords:** Gender, leadership, barriers, coping strategies, critical success factors

## INTRODUCTION

Overall, the status of executive women employed across the various economic sectors demonstrates their virtual absence from positions of influence. Despite growing numbers of female employees in the banking sector owing to equal-opportunity pressures from the women's movement; women continue to occupy peripheral corporate management roles due to enduring negative stereotypical patriarchal attitudes (Kabacoff, 1998). Female executives constitute a mere 4 percent of top corporate executives (Meyerson and Fletcher, 2000) amidst glaring underrepresentation of women in managerial leadership roles (Chamaru and Bombuwela, 2013); in Australia (Davidson, 2009) and the United Kingdom (Davidson, 2009).

In the outdoor agricultural sector, owing to stereotypical masculine values, corporate agricultural management remains largely male-dominated (Wicks and Bradshaw, 1994). This enduring trait exists since agro-based organisations protect male power while rewarding masculinity through an old boys' network (Oakley, 2000).

A male-oriented syndrome also deters women from venturing into mining (Kolb, 1997). This general field absence precludes aspiring women from occupying top positions in mining conglomerates where they occupy a mere 15-25 percent of executive positions (Maume, 1999, Jamieson, 1995). Aspiring females-whether intentional entrepreneurs or corporate climbers fail to achieve their career aspirations due to male competition in the sector (Cassirer and Reskin, 2000; Kolb, 1997).

SOEs also inhibit women's upward mobility in North America due to well established political male sub-cultures (Rigg and Sparrow, 1994). Active male resistance, sexualisation, threats, marginalisation, control and division of women creates institutional impediments to stall women's upward mobility in the SOE sector (Burke and Collins, 2001).

On a global scale, in education, owing to affirmative action, 30% of all graduates are female but they constitute a disproportionately low share of the available talent pool within executive boardroom seats in the sector (Chamaru and Bombuwela, 2013). This posits deep indications of gender insensitivity through a hidden curriculum based on selective subject allocation and gender insensitive language in texts which emasculates the girl child in school thereby preventing her future rise to administrative roles in the same sector (Kabacoff, 1998). Though women are as capable as men, fewer aspiring females have scaled the corporate ladder owing to sticky floors, slippery staircases and a glass ceiling (Chamaru and Bombuwela, 2013). However, available literature on the Zimbabwean economic sectors remained scarce to justify the current study on impact of gender on female career mobility in Zimbabwe.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender, as a social construct; relates to values, beliefs and attitudes ascribed to males and females in societies (Purcel, 2005). Though women can get employed in the formal sector, gender subjects aspiring females to an impenetrable glass ceiling that posits workplace inequalities based on sex (Baxter, 2000). This manifests itself through actual exclusion of women and pay differentials for the same job (Bell, 2005). These obstacles increase as women move up the corporate ladder (Baxter, 2000).

Leadership is the process of taking charge of subordinates by showing the way (Hunt, 2010) or leadership by illustration (Clark, 2015). It seeks to influence the behaviour of others (Armstrong, 2008) by inspiring others to give their best (Zinyemba, 2013). Thus, leadership gets the job done by matching individual and group needs and fostering team spirit (Fletcher, 2004).

The correlation between gender and female leadership aspirations has attracted immense academic interest amidst widespread research indications of the general exclusion of women from top executive posts by sector. Majority researches indicate that women face a range of barriers (glass ceiling) in their bid to scale up the corporate ladder based on attitudinal and organisational biases (Oakley, 2000). Globally, women are still faced with a restricted right of entry into higher organisational positions (Omotayo, Oladele and Adenike, 2013). The European Commission (2013), concurs that in Sweden, more women have been employed owing to growing service-based and knowledge-intensive economic structures but companies have failed to embrace the benefit of wider female educational opportunities. In Europe only 26% of aspiring females occupy management or board level positions due to vertical segregation (European Commission, 2013). Research indicates the division of these barriers into societal level, recruitment level, career pipeline and government level barriers.

Chamaru and Bombuwela (2013) noted that in Sri Lanka female executives contend with lack of work-life balance and competing responsibilities which impair their career advancement. The marriage institution is a limitation which places the responsibility for childcare and housework solely on women's shoulders thereby increasing women's stress levels to impact negatively on their career success according to Yun (2008). Zinyemba (2013) also alluded to the effect of culture and gender on female executive leaders' aspirations within the hospitality and financial services sector in Zimbabwe and established that in general, women are lowly represented in senior management. A Fortune 500 companies' study by the US Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) discovered that women contend with disadvantaged opportunity and attainment, prejudice and bias, cultural, gender and colour-based differences. Nicodemo and Waldmann (2009) allude to competing responsibilities (the triple burden of care, productive and reproductive responsibilities) and women are more likely to pick those jobs that allow them to adjust working hours as well as exit and enter the job market more frequently as observed by the European Commission (2013). Jensen (2010) agrees that globally, women are concentrated in low-productivity jobs, work in small firms and are over-represented among unpaid family workers and within the informal sector. Nicodemo and Waldmann (2009) correspond that women have become specialized in lower paying domestic care work and are less likely to rise to positions of authority within the professional job market. Redwood (1996) contends that the government is a culprit relative to women's upward mobility given its failure to collect and disaggregate employment-related data while also lacking a consistent and vigorous monitoring for compliance of affirmative action programs as also agreed by Mayuzumi (2015).

Pollard (2005) also established that there are recruitment-related barriers since most organisations promote their employees from within and yet they are not actively recruiting and adding more women to their ranks which they could promote further up the ladder. As soon as they are past the recruitment barriers women are subject to corporate climate barriers related to different gender communication styles, behaviours and ways of socializing.

Female executives also contend with career-pipeline barriers such as lack of mentoring, initial placement in dead-end jobs, different standard for performance evaluation between males and females and little or no access to informal networks of communication (Pollard, 2005). Pollard (2005) argues that in the USA, promotions at work result from performance evaluations and it has been established that women are less likely to be promoted than men and so their chances of career mobility are limited.

In view of the above barriers, aspiring career females need to adopt a range of coping strategies. Lichtenberg (2005) suggests that women can get more of what they want by being who they are. It has also been suggested that successful female managers exhibit a male managerial streak but more often

women have faced a double bind whereby they are damned if they behave like a man and if they don't and for this reason, the concept of leadership becomes problematic for women managers (Oakley, 2000). Huse and Solberg (2005) opine for the need to form workplace alliances, preparation and involvement, attending important decision arenas, taking leadership roles and being visible at work. Oakley (2000) agrees that aspiring females need to demonstrate their leadership through board participation while using their natural power of persuasion to get by. In order to break the barriers that prevent their upward mobility, female managers require the support of a role model (Rapaciolli, 2012) who show the way and hold the intern's hand in times of difficulty.

The critical success factors that could ease the upward mobility of women include: role modelling (Rapaciolli, 2012); ability to communicate and listen effectively; team playing (Burns, 2002); work-life balance (Jennings and McDougal, 2007); having positive mental attitude and self-confidence (Zinyemba, 2013) and the possession of managerial acumen (Shephard, 2018).

The above demonstrates growing research interest in the area but there are limited studies focused on the various economic sectors targeted by the current study. While other studies have largely focused on single sectors, the current study adopts a multisectoral approach to establish the impact of gender on female upward mobility at work in Zimbabwe for later generalisability of the results to the general economic setup.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

### Major objective

To determine how gender impacts on women's leadership aspirations within Zimbabwe's formal employment sectors.

### Specific Objectives

1. To identify barriers to women's leadership aspirations in Zimbabwe's formal employment sectors.
2. To comprehend the coping strategies adopted by female executives.
3. To identify the critical success factors for female managers in the formal enterprises.
4. To determine the strategies for dealing with the challenges faced by formally employed female executives

### Research questions

#### Major research question

How does gender impact upon women's leadership aspirations within Zimbabwe's formal employment sectors?

#### Specific research questions:

1. What are the barriers to women's leadership aspirations in Zimbabwe's formal employment sectors?
2. How do female executives cope with the barriers to their leadership aspiration?
3. What are the critical success factors for female managers in the formal enterprises?
4. How can the plight of female executives be addressed across Zimbabwe's formal employment sector?

## METHODOLOGY

The pragmatic philosophy was used in this study based on practical considerations wherein the researcher decided on what was important or useful to the research and rejected what was not (Johnson & Clark, 2006). Pragmatism prevented the researcher from engaging in futile debates about relative aspects such as

reality or truth (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998) since the researcher considered that reality concerning the impact of gender on women's leadership aspirations was external and multiple which enabled the researcher to gather varied data on the subject.

The exploratory research design was adopted in this study given the subjective nature of the experiences of female executives within formal institutions in Zimbabwe which had to be explored in order to discover the subtle nuances that might evade generic observations. The exploratory study sought to find out what was happening, to seek new insights, to ask questions and assess phenomena in a new light (Robson, 2002). The exploratory study was conducted through a search of the literature and interviewing experts on the subjects via questionnaires, interviews and secondary data.

The researcher adopted a mixed methods research approach which mixed aspects of both questionnaires and interviews supported by secondary data. This enabled the researcher to deeply probe the area of study and obtain valuable information from multiple perspectives (Saunders, Philip and Thornhill, 2016).

The population consisted of females employed within Zimbabwe's educational, agricultural, financial, mining and State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs). Rubin and Babbie (2009) define a sample as a selected group of respondents chosen from a population to which judgments about the whole population can be generalized. The sample calculated on the basis of Malhotra's (2009) sample size calculator consisted of 90 career level respondents selected on the basis of non-probability sampling as focus was on those who could provide useful information on gender and female leadership aspirations. Purposive sampling involved the deliberate or judgemental selection of certain respondents who meet the criteria set forth by the researcher (Rubin and Babbie, 2009). It is mostly used when the researcher is interested in getting an inexpensive approximation of the truth within a short space of time (Leedy, et al 2010).

relative to ethics, Crowl (1993) suggests the need to protect respondents in all kinds of studies. Thus, informed consent was sought beforehand to enable the respondents know what they were involving themselves into and that they could withdraw at any given moment. The researcher also upheld the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents who were not required to disclose their identity for reasons of objectivity and respondent security as advised by Kumar (2003). This means that the researcher also made extra efforts to avoid physical or emotional harm to subjects under study while also ensuring that own personal biases and opinions did not interfere in the way of the research and that fair consideration was given.

## **DELIMITATIONS**

The study was focused on Zimbabwe's education, agriculture, finance, mining and state-owned enterprises based in Harare for ease of data collection. This multisectoral approach enabled the researcher to make more generalised observations about the impact of gender on female career mobility in Zimbabwe. The concept of study were the gendered experiences of female executives within these organisations and aspiring female executives were interviewed because of their unique experiences in each sector. The research was focused upon the first half of 2020 which corresponded with the time allowed for conducting this university research for the Masters programme at the BUSE.

## **LIMITATIONS**

This research was limited by reluctance on the part of respondents to provide information pertinent to the research due to non-disclosure agreements that prohibit employees from sharing corporate data. The researcher often failed to access certain areas within the organisations and she overcame this challenge by



reassuring respondents that the information gathered was strictly for academic purposes. Moreover, researcher's presence negatively impacted upon the nature of data obtained given demand characteristics that often accosted respondents. However, the researcher was as objective as possible and assured the respondents to exercise freedom in answering questions. Besides, the respondents were not required to write their names on the questionnaire which was the primary data collection instrument.

## Data collection and response rate

### Response rate

These results were derived from questionnaires and interview returns from Zimbabwe's financial educational, agricultural, mining and State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs). The research targeted 80 female respondents but only 59 questionnaires were returned thereby representing a 74% response rate. The relatively high response rate occurred because the researcher waited upon the respondents as they completed their questions given that they were busy at their workstations and could not be trusted to return the copies. The rest (26%) were not returned because some respondents did not return the questionnaires when they asked for permission to complete them during their free time. The 74% response rate indicated an acceptable level of penetration into the area of study as noted by Altman and Bland (2017).

## DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative questionnaire data was analysed quantitatively by means of Excel while qualitative data was analysed qualitatively by means of thematic coding. The other components of the questionnaire together with in-depth interview data were subjected to thematic coding whereby recurring items or issues were noted and highlighted and inferences drawn therefrom. This mixed method approach ensured a kind of internal triangulation which allows for detailed coverage of all the issues at hand. The mixed methodology allowed the researcher to consider the phenomena under investigation from a multiplicity of perspectives thereby allowing for the harvesting of more detailed observations. The collected data was pulled out of the questionnaires, tabulated and analysed on an item by item basis in tabular form, using Excel. Descriptive statistical methods of data analysis such as tables, pie charts and bar graphs were used to clearly present the various issues pertaining to the research. A narrative technique with supporting relevant quotations and stories from the participants was employed to deal with qualitative data.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Barriers to aspiring females at work

The study noted that aspiring female executives contend with a range of barriers (See Table.1).

**Table 1: Barriers to female leadership aspirations**

NATURE OF BARRIER	DESCRIPTION	PERCENTAGE RESPONSE RATE		
		AGREE %	NEUTRAL %	DISAGREE %
Societal-level barriers	We face demanding responsibilities	83	8	9
	Males fear competition	81	14	5
	We lack spousal support	66	14	17
	We face gender insensitive language	58	19	23

<b>Recruitment-level barriers</b>	We have fewer female board members	89	7	4
	Our board chair is male	85	1	14
	The recruitment committee is gender insensitive	49	19	32
<b>Career-pipeline barriers</b>	Males don't respect us at work	72	10	18
	We struggle to enter higher level jobs	75	15	10
	We struggle for promotion	80	12	8
	Female managers face limited responsibility	53	24	23
	We lack mentorship opportunities at work	68	8	24
	There are limited informal networks for us	51	17	32
	Females are subject to different performance standards at work	59	10	33
<b>Government level barriers</b>	Lack of effective gender policies to promote the upward mobility of aspiring females	58	17	25

**Source: Primary data (2020).**

The above indicates that aspiring females contend with a range of work-related barriers that impinge upon their upward career mobility across various economic sectors in Zimbabwe. Results indicated a range of obstacles to female career mobility as well as numerous coping strategies and critical success factors required for effective promotion of female career mobility.

## 1. Societal level barriers

Results demonstrate the prevalence of societal-level barriers facing aspiring females at work. Women do not absolve themselves of their domestic responsibilities even when they assume executive status at work hence, they have to contend with child bearing, spousal support and care work besides meeting their professional workplace obligations. They are often overwhelmed with such responsibilities and they struggle to balance the load so as to be able to achieve proficiency on both fronts. This concurs with Zinyemba (2013) who argues that most women in Third world economies experience minimal representation in business leadership and they occupy more traditional roles that are supportive and submissive thereby creating a glass ceiling that is even harder to break. The US Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) study also confirmed that executive women suffer from inflexible work arrangements given their assumption of the role of principal care giver where early care systems remain undeveloped and underfunded (as in Zimbabwe).

Results also indicated that the rise of women up the corporate ladder poses a threat to males within most institutions given that traditionally, women have been confined to the domestic sphere of the house and their journey to the workplace was considered more of an affront by men with a higher level of entitlement. This means that men often place obstacles in the path of ambitious women as men have been traditionally socialized into the mentality that the woman's role is in the bedroom and kitchen at home. This implies that male competition is an invisible barrier (glass ceiling) that female executives have to contend with in

their upward mobility towards the boardroom due to attitudinal, societal and organisational biases. This confirms a view by Oakley (2000) that women are faced with a restricted right of entry into higher organisational positions.

Results also indicated the lack of spousal support for most aspiring females. This shows that women who are ambitious are caught between competitive men at work and unsupportive husbands at home. This observation concurs with a finding by Writh (2001) who argues that most males feel that household responsibilities are the sole responsibilities of women hence female executives find it hard to balance the competing responsibilities of home and work. Hoobler, Wayne and Lemon (2009) also added that females are often not considered a perfect fit due to their competing responsibilities related to home and work.

Gender insensitive language is also an issue that affects ambitious career women in Zimbabwe where male hostility manifests itself in terms of language that is crude or sexually explicit. Such behaviour tends to prevent most women from venturing into territories traditionally occupied by males and this perhaps explains the absence of women in most top executive posts. Procos and Padavic (2002) also agreed that in Nigeria male police officers often refer to female officers as prostitutes and this often kills the women's enterprising abilities thereby curtailing their potential promotion at work. This implies that owing to male aggression, female executive may miss out on valuable social and cultural capital which would vouch for their quest for higher level posts in their organisations. Chamaru (2013) also established that most males find it hard to believe that females could rise up without canvassing for male support through sexual favours and this forms the basis for sexual and verbal abuse.

## **2. Recruitment level barriers**

Recruitment level barriers also encompassed the numerical executive inferiority of aspiring female leaders. Being a board member is usually the mark of achievement that demonstrates a high achievement and affiliation drive but it seems organisations are blind to female talent thereby resulting in their virtual absence from top leadership positions. Thus, when fewer female board members exist, this means that they face a numerical challenge when voting for matters that should ordinarily benefit women. Pollard (2005) also confirmed this by arguing that most organisations are not actively recruiting and adding more women to their ranks whom they could promote further up the organisational hierarchy. As noted by Premuzic (2013) also agrees that female executives are fewer based on the general belief that females are incapable, are uninterested in leadership and that they might be interested but they suffer an invisible career barrier based on prejudiced stereotypes.

Results also indicated that top leadership in terms of chairperson roles was male dominated. The board chairperson is a centre of power with full executive authority to make sweeping changes within the organisation and where such a chair is not female; it's highly unlikely that such a board would be sensitive to the career mobility requirements of women. In any instance, companies are formed for largely economic reasons and the rise of women through the corporate ladder at times does not represent the strategic intent of any organisation.

Amidst the gender insensitivity of recruitment committees, the study noted that the initial entry of aspiring females into higher tier jobs is difficult. This implies that it is difficult for females to join work at first as confirmed by Pollard (2005) who argued that working mothers are stereotyped as not being serious or reliable enough to be trusted with leadership positions since their priorities lean more towards their domestic family raising responsibilities and might struggle to juggle the multiple responsibilities associated with executive top posts which explains the reluctance of recruitment committees to consider married female applicants.



### **3. Career pipeline barriers**

Career pipeline barriers manifested themselves in terms of lack of respect for female executives who lack the executive aura that should compel other employees to defer to them. In this case, female leaders may not be taken seriously and their orders may not be respected as such. Hence, the key result areas associated with women may be found to be lagging hence there may be little upon which the secondment of women to top positions is based. Unfortunately, as noted by Zinyemba (2013) following the adoption of technology these days, the concept of Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS) implies that the day to day performance of each employee is being systematically recorded and forms the basis for future promotion but when such a system demonstrates negative performance women cannot get promoted and this explains their absence at the top. This seems to imply therefore that much of the failure attributed to female bosses not out of their own volition but it's a result of subordinate friction commonly associated with female leaders who unfortunately command male teams given the traditional exclusion of women from most job categories. Grimshaw and Rubery (2007) also agree that women are disproportionately undervalued because their range of skills are compressed and there is often low value accorded to the skills owned by women resulting in comparatively low value being attached to the final output.

Research also noted that aspiring women struggle for promotion which is based on performance benchmarks such as product quality or on the basis of quantitative results such as predetermined sales figures but when a set of obstacles such as uncooperative staff is placed on the road; female executives may not succeed in time to get promoted or attract the attention of incumbents responsible for secondment to higher level jobs. This finding was confirmed by Pollard (2005) who argued that performance evaluators find it hard to understand how career women can juggle their triple responsibilities and yet emerge successful in their current jobs hence women are less likely to get promoted as they receive fewer favourable attributions compared to men.

Women were also noted to occupy dead-end jobs which relate to occupations wherein there is no room for upward mobility and this implies that at instances women are boxed within careers that they cannot rise any further and this constitutes a glass ceiling they have to contend with. They thus suffer from career rigidity and even when they can excel within their current job, there is nowhere else they can go since jobs have been compartmentalized. This implies that most female executives are not motivated to work harder because the boundary has been set for them already as confirmed by Pollard (2005) that this lack of career progression for female executives is premised upon their initial placement in dead end jobs.

It was also evident from the results that aspiring females suffer from limited mentorship opportunities. It is evident that to become leaders' women have to be mentored by other women but where such mentors are absent, aspiring female leaders are lost. It is also clear that men may not be appropriate mentors for women given their different terms of reference and the fact that mentors have to baby sit their protégés and in fact most men feel that mentoring women may be considered inappropriate. This implies that due to traditional gender stereotypes society does not believe that men can mentor women or vice versa and this confirms a finding by Pollard (2005) that in the USA there is general lack of cross gender mentoring because men fear that the relationship may be perceived as improper.

The aspiring women were also subject to lack of access to informal networks. Informal networks have been used as avenues for the sharing of work-related information and these networks provide room for the identification of talent and when women are excluded from this public sphere it means that their talent remains hidden and cannot be identified for secondment up the corporate hierarchy. For example, it was noted during the study that most institutions now have bars and clubs at the workplace where employees

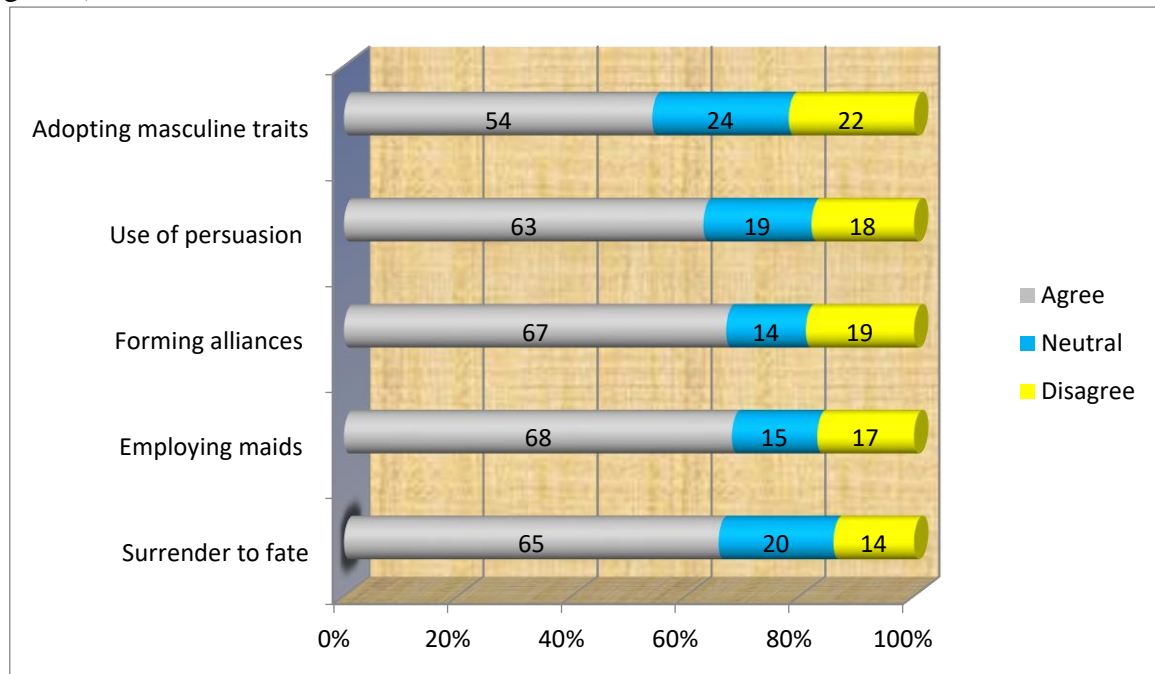
socialise after hours while some have golf club member subscriptions but due to social and cultural practices, very few women are actually found there as they have to be at home meeting their other obligations. This confirms the view that the workplace is a mere extension of the same patriarchal tendencies found within the home that tend to circumvent the interests of aspiring females. Decent women cannot be found within clubs at night yet this is where all promotion occurs and where cultural and social capital is exchanged. Thus, the social and cultural capital of women, which should contribute to their job competency and promotion are narrowed down by their exclusion from social circles at work. Pollard (2005) also found out that women have little or no access to informal networks of communication which however are valuable sources of market intelligence and employee productivity.

#### **4. Government level barriers**

The research also noted that the plight of female executives is worsened by negative government level support for aspiring females across all sectors. It seems from the evidence that the government which should put in place policy frameworks for the promotion of affirmative action at work has been less cooperative. Though several pieces of legislation such as the Equal Pay Act and the Legal Age of Majority Act and the Domestic violence act exist, these laws do not speak to the leadership aspirations of women in general and at organisational level, there is no compulsion on organisations to be gender sensitive at all and where anything might have happened towards female empowerment it's an act of gender tokenism. This was confirmed by Adler and Israeli (1994) who contend that though the number of employed females has grown in the USA it's simply title inflation without corresponding pay and responsibility. In the same vein given that the government is manned largely by male faces since women have been traditionally excluded from political activities given the hard bargaining and violence that accompanies political activities. The only women found within political circles are either single or divorced and such women often lack support from their fellow women and the men they seek to replace in Parliament. This means that there is little interest on the part of the current government to institute laws that benefit women in terms of corporate ascension because if that occurs, they might also seek commensurate political ascension thereby challenging the status quo. In essence, male politicians are guilty of ring fencing their positions and are less inclined to promote legislation that would lead to more women joining executive boards in their organisations. Of course, it can be acknowledged that the government has crafted affirmative action policies such as the political quota system aimed at ring fencing some political seats for women but this is not fully empowering given that the women seconded to these positions are bench warmers with little interest in forwarding the agenda of the entire female constituency. As a result, when women are missing from government policy making level, it is hardly possible to find them in corporate boards because the basic superstructure is characterised by gender insensitivity.

## Coping strategies for aspiring female leaders

Research noted that aspiring female executives respond to their workplace challenges in a range of ways (See Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Coping strategies available to female executives**

**Source: Primary data (2020)**

When asked how they cope with the challenges to their upward career mobility the majority agreed: that they have surrendered to fate (65%); that they have employed maids for help (68%), that they have formed workplace alliances (67%); that they have used the power of persuasion (63%) and that they have adopted masculine traits as shown by a majority response rate of 54%.

### 1. Employment of maids

The employment of maids enables aspiring executives to balance their work and domestic responsibilities. However, there is a limit to what the maid can do and more often the executive career woman has to take over as soon as they get home and more often the maid cannot replace the mother of the house. In fact, the employment of maids has increased the burden for the executive given the need to check home frequently (Geisler, 2008).

### 2. Workplace alliances

Though they engender workplace solidarity among employed females, workplace alliances are problematic given the numerical disadvantage faced by females at work. Female executives need to understand that boardrooms are arena for power games hence they should for alliances, prepare and get involved, attend important decision arenas and take leadership (Huse and Solberg, 2005). However, executive career women are lonely while lacking recourse to social groups for support or inspiration. With no mentors to lean on or subordinates to confide in, such women feel emasculated at work and are more likely to avoid taking over more responsibility.

### 3. Use of persuasion

Using the power of natural persuasion can get women past their obstacles where more often the boss convinces the subordinate to accept their point of view in a non-combative manner. Lichtenberg (2005)

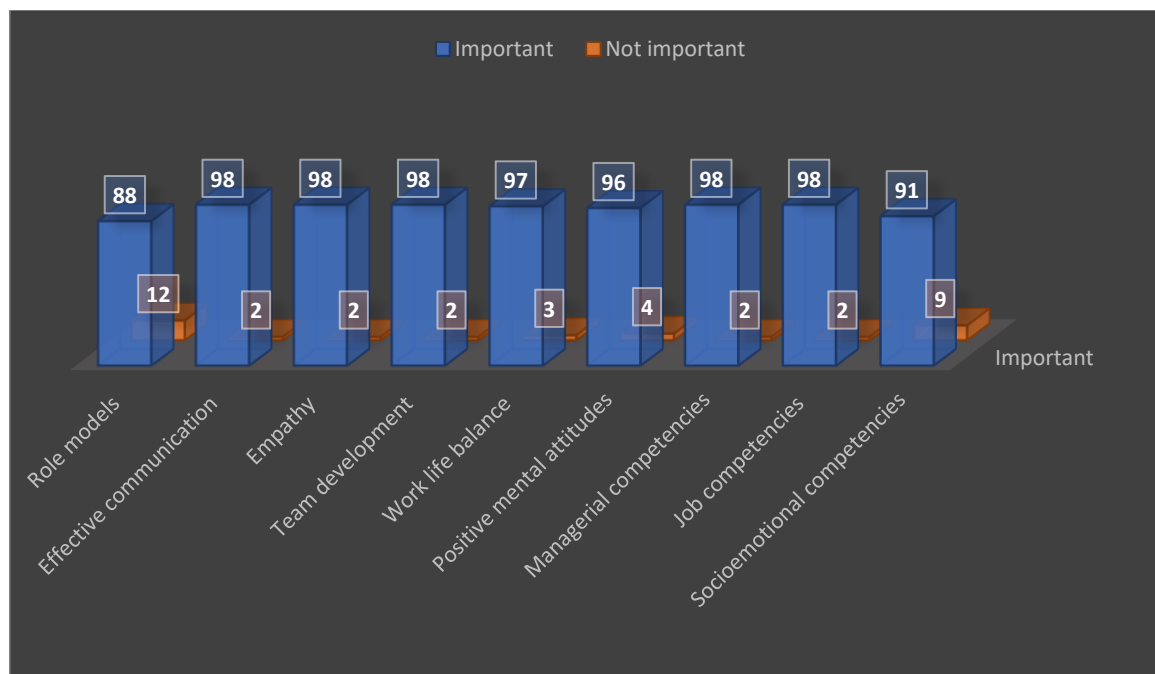
contends that female executives often use their natural powers of persuasion and influence to gain support within their workplaces. However, this may be misconstrued as an act of weakness and in certain cases, it might even appear inappropriate when the female executive has to plead with subordinates for attention.

#### 4. Adoption of masculine traits

The adoption of masculine traits is also a key coping mechanism for female executives but this seems to confirm the view that women cannot achieve the desired respect unless they act and think like men. As Premuzic (2013) also concurs, the display of confidence by most men is often taken as a sign of competence hence male manifestations of hubris are often mistaken as charisma or leadership potential often appear more in men than in women. For this reason, in most group settings, overconfident, narcissistic self-centred individuals are often taken as leaders and these characteristics are more commonly found in men than women. This seems to imply that women who display feminine calm temperament cannot be leaders and this false assumption has led most organisations towards failure. It has also been noted that overconfidence and arrogance are often inversely related to leadership potential but the ability to inspire team confidence and set aside personal agendas for collective good is far more important than selfish pursuits that are often interpreted as signs of leadership. It therefore seems clear that humility is a far more important element of successful leadership compared to machismo as Premuzic (2013) agrees.

#### Critical success factors for female executives

The researcher established various important factors that could undergird the upward career mobility of aspiring female executives (See Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Critical success factors for female executives**

**Source: Primary data (2020)**

When asked about the relative importance of various factors in easing the upward mobility of female executives the majority cited role modelling (88%), effective communication (98%), empathy (98%), team development (98%), work life balance (97%), positive mental attitudes (96%), managerial competence (98%), job competencies (98%) and socio-emotional competencies (91%).

### **1. Role models**

The value of role modelling is premised on the fact that since the executives are still learning the ropes on leadership, they require the support of other established females who have scaled the heights to the top of their organisations. Rapaciolli (2012) agrees that role models show their protégés the way guide the protégé towards better competency standards but given the limited number of established female executives in Zimbabwe at the moment, it is often difficult to obtain an effective mentor to whom the women could look up to. Zinyemba (2013) noted that already established female executives are often too busy dealing with their own problems. This confirms that appropriate mentoring strategies are non-existent for female executives and for this reason; female executives struggle to understand their responsibilities on the top job.

### **2. Effective listening and empathy**

Effective listening and workplace empathy enable executives to offer their subordinates a range of positive experiences. Premuzic (2013) also concurs that this engenders emotional intelligence whereby female executives adopt modest behaviours as compared to men and it has been noted that employees are only satisfied when the value proposition is subject to functional, emotional and self-expressive benefits. Hence, female executives will achieve success through being more sensitive, considerate and humble. Men are often more arrogant, manipulative and risk prone compared to women hence the adoption of masculine characteristics is considerably negative for aspiring female executives. It has been noted that the same characteristics or personality disorders of narcissism, psychopath and histrionics that make men succeed do not work for women who lack these traits. Thus, it is evident that factors that could make women successful leaders stand in the way of their recognition for leadership promotion.

### **3. Team work**

When managers promote team effort, they bring together a group of employees to brainstorm about the best way to solve organisational problems. When they work as part of a team female executives can easily achieve success where individual weaknesses are compensated by the presence of other members and for this reason, female executives will not be exposed to undue scrutiny when they constitute a team. Rosener (1990) agrees that female executives are effective when they foster a sense of cohesion among group members while Burns (2002) also adds that such leaders keep team members focused on core values by adopting a transformational leadership style. Eagly (1987) noted that women are more likely to elicit more respect and buy-in from their subordinates, communicate their vision clearly, empower and mentor subordinates and approach problem solving in a more flexible and creative way compared to men. On the other hand, male managers are less likely to bond with their subordinates and are relatively more inept at rewarding them for their actual performance as Premuzic (2013) found out.

### **4. Functional work-life balance**

It was also noted that female executives require a functional work-life balance for effective delivery of their executive mandate. Chamaru (2013) contends that this offers the executives flexible hours and day-care facilities in order to balance home and office responsibilities. However, as Nicodemo and Waldmann (2009) opine, giving women flexible working arrangements will become the basis for their low remuneration and responsibilities. The other challenge is whether the executives have the stamina to meet these obligations with equal zeal and precision and the attitude of male counterparts towards such seemingly unfair work arrangements. Jennings and McDougal (2007) contend that the multiple areas of responsibility for female executives increase pressure on them while reducing the amount of time dedicated to formal work. More often, they are likely to shirk their responsibilities elsewhere leading to



potential conflict that stands in the way of their success in both sectors of the home and workplace.

### **5. Positive mental attitudes**

Aspiring females will also need to demonstrate a positive mental attitude at work thereby having a clear conscience and aptitudes that allow for effective and efficient delivery. Zinyemba (2013) concurs that female executives need to balance their emotions and rationality in order to achieve success. However, this only occurs in a context that is free of cognitive dissonance but given that most female executives have other social obligations, it is often difficult to maintain a sober state of mind throughout the day especially if they have to check on family (if married) or on a spouse (if dating). Attitude is about feelings and it is more often difficult to maintain a positive attitude in an atmosphere of perceived male hostility.

### **6. Managerial and intellectual competencies**

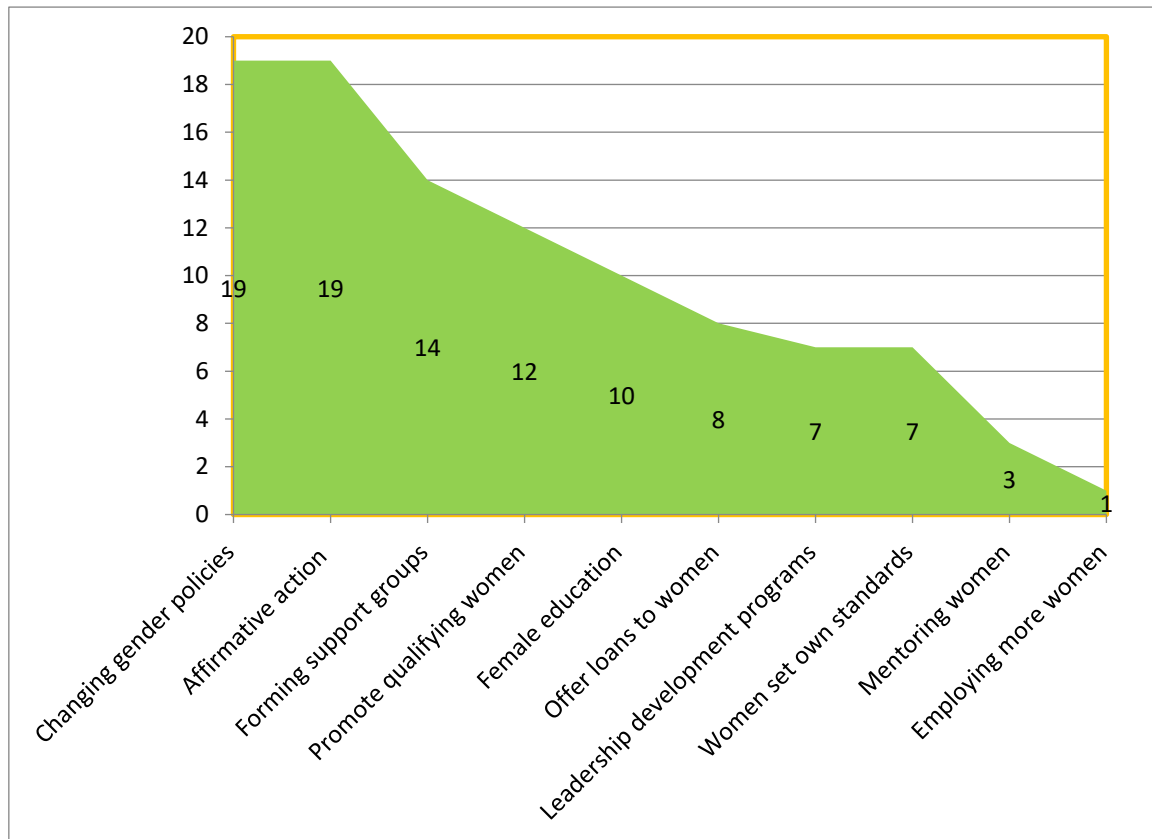
The possession of managerial and intellectual competencies enables female executives to balance efficiency and effectiveness as well as business acumen. This is also associated with skills competency application (doing) alongside knowledge competency related to critical and creative thinking. Shephard (2018) agrees that effective managers exhibit positive skill related to goal setting, promoting cooperation, solving conflict and making effective decisions and Herman (1996) concurs that female executives will need competency development in conscious reasoning (emotional intelligence). It is clear that such a mental attitude exists in a context of limited thought disruptors which will also allow the female executive to develop learning skills competency from past experiences as well as develop abstract skills for assessing situations.

### **7. Job knowledge competencies**

Research also noted that the success of female executives is premised upon having the required attributes of job knowledge competency in order to meet performance standards set for them. Shephard (2018) agrees that they should execute their work through concrete convergent thinking and abstract divergent thinking to enhance their creativity for variety accompanied by rationality, facts and critical thinking (high IQ). They should clearly understand management systems and operationalisation of plans to achieve the required job quality standards but the facts on the ground are different. The situation of effective delivery on the areas above would occur in a context of subordinate collaboration and top management support but where this is lacking, female executives may find it hard to achieve the required job competencies.

## Strategies for addressing the plight of female executives

Addressing the challenges facing aspiring female executives requires a range of interventions (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3: Strategies to deal with female leadership challenges**

**Source: Primary data (2020)**

When asked to rank the strategies that could be employed to address the plight of employed female executives the majority indicated the utility of gender policies (19%), affirmative action (19%), support groups (14%), promoting qualifying women (12%), female education (10%), offering loans to women entrepreneur (8%), leadership development (7%), setting independent standards for women (7%) mentorship (3%) and employing more women (1%).

### 1. Changing current gender policies

Changing gender policies was considered a useful approach since the current legal measures were inadequate to address the plight of female executives. The study established that there is no clear gender policy regarding female leadership aspirations though legal statutes exist about the need for fair consideration at work. This means that organisations are free to interpret the laws in any manner they want and as is always the case, there exists a dichotomy between the existence of laws or policies and their implementation. This was confirmed by Statistics Sweden (2012) which claimed that despite having an ambitious gender policy, there is still a long way before gender equity can be achieved. Thus, there exists a chasm in Zimbabwe regarding government commitment to improving the gender situation at work though Mwata (2010) claimed that the situation was different in Kenya where Presidential Directive of 2006 called for a 30% quota to be reserved for women in all organisations.

## **2. Affirmative action**

Affirmative action would lead to more female presence in executive boards and higher-level positions. This result demonstrates the absence of affirmative action at most jobs whereby deserving female candidates would get preferential treatment in job placements but this seems to create the impression that without being propped up, female executives cannot make it. It seems to confirm the commonly held assumption that successful female job candidates have to canvass for support before applying for higher level jobs. It smacks of favouritism on the part of male job applicants and for this reason female executives who achieve upward mobility are less inclined to command respect from their peers at work.

## **3. Promotion of qualifying women**

Promoting qualifying women to managerial positions would engender an inclusive attitude to employment policies across organisations (which seems missing) at the moment. However, given the earlier observation that recruitment committees are gender insensitive it is highly unlikely that qualified women will find space. In essence, men continue to occupy lucrative top positions across most organisations and it's less likely that they could step aside in the interests of balancing the scores. Given the prevailing high unemployment in Zimbabwe, competition for the top jobs is intense and men are more poised for take over given their traditional advantages relative to education and this means that even if women may qualify for the jobs advertised a range of forces prevent them from getting the recognition because some male candidates may be better qualified, more experienced and possess the natural male advantage especially if the recruitment committee is male. For females to qualify, they will have to work even harder than males to prove their mettle or expose themselves to abuse.

## **4. Promotion opportunities for female education**

Promoting female education was considered a useful strategy for aspiring female executives as leadership can be nurtured from an early age. This seems to imply that the present educational curriculum in Zimbabwe does not support the leadership aspirations of women. This is because of the hidden curriculum wherein the majority of teachers for instance are female yet leadership positions are male dominated which seems to give to the girl child the impression that women can work but cannot become leaders in their institutions. School textbooks depict males in instrumental roles while women are projected in domestic setups thereby confirming the gendered view that girls will become like their mothers while boys will go out to work. This means that leadership is primed earlier into the mentality of the boy child and given resource limitations, girls are more likely to drop out of school compared to boys. Given these realities the education of girls is a challenge that will stand in their leadership aspirations though efforts are currently being made to address this issue through universities such as the Women's University in Africa. However, while education will empower women, it will not address the primary problem of their exclusion from work and top tier jobs and this calls for more robust measures as such.

## **5. Female oriented leadership development programs**

Leadership development programs for women were also considered a useful strategy. This will entail the need for mentorship and continuous learning by observation but this is only so in the context of appropriate working environments. It is also important to recall that males are also subject to the same treatment hence leadership development may not give female executive a distinct competitive advantage at work as such.

## **6. Women to set up own independent standards**

Women were also urged to set up their own independent standards instead of relying on standards set for them by men. This seems to imply that the current systems of ranking talent and talent potential are gender blind and for this reason they offer an unfair method of talent assessment for female candidates. Chamaru

and Bombuwela (2013) agree that female executives are hamstrung by individual factors hence they should work on setting their own standards of performance than rely on male guidelines. This is related to the earlier observation that females are subject to different performance standards at work. This approach would however lead to a disruption of the status quo thereby leading to potential friction with the prevailing system in place. Thus, executive women may face even more protracted resistance than they are currently facing at the moment leading to further challenges on their leadership aspirations.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

### **Barriers facing female executives**

It can be concluded from the foregoing that the conflict surrounding women's abandonment of their biological responsibilities is a major cause for concern for most men who tend to ring fence their jobs via a range of defensive techniques. It seems as if all men, who have been rigorously schooled in the rigors of patriarchy feel the same negative attitude towards the aspiring female executive whom they consider a threat or a nuisance especially since this woman is orphaned among males in the boardroom. Unfortunately, little can be done to help the embattled female executive except by means of surrogate motherhood but this again tends to take away a useful duty for the women who take pleasure in raising their children without going through a surrogate or sub-contracting the practice to a significant other.

The male fear of female competition is often justified given that males perhaps did not face much competition for the same jobs but following growing pressure from the feminist movement, more women have joined the workforce and are often better educated and better resourced than males in the same jobs. Hence, conflict is inevitable in such situations, which explains male recourse to vulgar language and sexually inappropriate behaviour that is meant to compel women to leave. This means that aspiring female executives have to be courageous enough to face male hostility at work though they may not necessarily need to copy such crass behaviour.

What exacerbates women's plight in the lack of spousal support at home and it is also cogent to opine that women who work will need to be supported by their families in order to take up positions of responsibility. However, where there is opposition at both the domestic front of the home and the foreign front of the workplace, women's leadership aspirations will remain a dream. In fact, when men support their wives at work, this may increase the level of female confidence at work, improve their work ratings and amplify their chances of getting noticed for promotion. The societal level barriers prevent the aspiring female executive from leaving home for work in the first place while throwing in various obstacles in a way that encourages women to stay at home more often than seek work. So, as long as women are compelled to look more towards the domestic sphere of the home, their concentration at work becomes checked and their social and cultural capital is inclined more towards home duties than corporate executive duties that would promote their upward mobility into positions of authority in their organisations. Patriarchy will always be a barrier that aspiring female leaders have to contend with if they are to occupy executive posts across organisations.

The fact that there are very fewer women at executive level is indicative of their systematic exclusion from systems where talent can be identified for future nurturing. Given their competing biological and social responsibilities, women cannot venture out into territories dominated by men when their talent can be identified and strong job-related networks can be forged. The board reflects a male subculture to which women are not privy hence their contribution to board deliberations is somewhat spasmodic. The presence of a male figure at the top implies that the entire organisation exhibits a male attitude which could have

been effectively diluted by female presence in the board but since women are often missing, the male culture predominates and stands against female leadership aspirations. It is clear from the results that very few females are actually recruited into organisations because they suffer from the gender insensitivity of the recruitment team. Given their absence from most jobs, they suddenly cannot find themselves in corporate positions when they are absent from lower level positions in the first place.

It is evident that women are not respected at work which is a natural extension of their lack of respect within the society in general where they are seen as natural occupants of domestic lower authority roles within the household. When women join the workforce, it seems they carry over the same stigma they have as mothers and wives to the office, often leading other men to rank fellow female employees on the basis of the same yardstick they use to rate their wives. For this reason, men find it hard to take instructions from women and even when they do, they exhibit some inherent resistance.

Besides, women struggle to enter higher level jobs since such jobs have been traditionally monopolised by men and also because society looks down upon powerful women who are rumoured to have slept or bribed their way up the corporate ladder. For this reason, very few women are actually courageous enough to hazard the speculation that they are loose because it bears some social cost associated with the stability of their marriages.

The different performance standards used to rank talent across most organisations imply the presence of job-related segregation in Zimbabwe hence women cannot enter territories monopolised by men. This could be the reason why women are found mostly in jobs that require their extensive use of talents related to speaking (marketing) while men are found in more instrumental roles within organisations (technically competent job responsibilities).

Women also struggle to get promoted because the criteria for promotion work against the best interests of women. This is because employees are promoted on the golf course and within clubs and social circles in which very few women are found. Hence, their chances of getting noticed are narrow. The fewer women who make it are subject to labels that may even prevent them from rising at all and if they do rise at some point, they may be considered dangerous. This perhaps explains why most women lack mentors since mentorship occurs within most informal circles where women are not found in large numbers and besides, society looks down upon women who take on male mentors. It seems from the foregoing therefore that career pipeline barriers are an offshoot of societal level barriers that firstly seek to prevent women from going to work. But when they join the workforce, the same social forces seem to continuously place obstacles in the path of career women because at some point, such women will need to be married as all decent women do. Because of the social pressure to get married, it seems that aspiring females may be forced to reconsider their options from time to time and this work against their upward mobility.

Government level barriers exist because the government itself is guilty of gender tokenism wherein female related interests take a back stage when issues of national importance are discussed. Given the skewed sex distribution within powerful decision-making organs of the government it is not surprising that very few women are actually found within corporate boards. In fact, within the state-owned enterprises, there exist very few women in the upper echelons of power thereby demonstrating the same feeling that women cannot lead organisations effectively.

### **Coping strategies**

In choosing to surrender to their fate, most executive women have avoided the trouble they could face both at work from fellow men who compete for the same posts and their spouses who are also reluctant to



offer support to their women. However, this choice does not seem to work for the women because they watch in dismay as others rise above them and achieve commensurate pay and status benefits.

Though executive women have been successful in the employment of maids for assistance, this has not lessened their triple burden because the significant other (maid) has some parameters she cannot breach. In some cases, where the maid has taken over a more than proportionate component of the incumbent mother's duties this has led to conflict across most households. This implies that though the maid presents a lucrative opportunity for executive women to win their freedom to pursue a career, it is clear that such women have employed competition into their homes especially if such women are married.

Though alliances can break the ice for executive women, it is clear that across most organisations, women are scattered in different departments and having no common frames of reference make it difficult to find each other when problems arise. In fact, the only common denominator among most career women is their sex and little else promotes their solidarity at work. It is also clear that the interests and motives of an executive woman are at odds with those of a lower level employee who might be inclined to grow jealousy towards their female boss. It is not too farfetched to assume that envy could be to blame for the low levels of solidarity among women at work.

Persuasion implies that the boss more often has to defer to the interests of the subordinates which however tends to dilute their authority. This means that more often, female executive bosses are not that well respected at their work as compared to male bosses. This explains why at times they have to adopt masculine traits such as the use of threats and punishments in order to induce appropriate behaviour in their subordinates but this often contributes to growing employee resistance and the development of negative feelings towards the female executive.

### **Critical success factors for female executives**

The study noted that female executives can achieve their leadership aspiration if they have access to positive role models but research evidence demonstrates the virtual absence of such influential figures. This is because established women are fewer which create the impression that they are unavailable to mentor others or are too worried about their own inadequacies.

The female executives will also need to be effective in communication and listening but given the symbiotic nature of communication, they may not be able to achieve the desired outcomes in communication encounters which may in fact confirm the inherent gender stereotypes. This is because communication takes note of both verbal and nonverbal cues and at times, negative feelings about female bosses may form part of the communication encounter leading to negative rapport which stands in the way of productive workplace relations.

The research also noted that female executives will need to exhibit empathy towards fellow employees but more often such compassion may be misconstrued as an act of weakness on the part of the female executive. It creates the impression that female executives are emotional freaks which reduces their overall rating in the eyes of their subordinates. Becoming part of a team will also help female executives achieve their leadership aspirations as their individual weaknesses (perceived) may be obscured by the group. This seems to suggest that on their own, female executives will become exposed.

It is also cogent to conclude that the upward mobility of female executives is rooted in the creation of effective work life balances which seek to offer them some freedom from work in order to attend to their social obligations. This kind of arrangement is however fraught with challenges which may be interpreted as acts of favouritism on the part of male counterparts. It is also clear that the creation of a work life

balance does not lessen the burden for female executives but it simply creates a flexible work arrangement for them which ultimately results in overwhelming responsibilities.

Moreover, positive mental attitudes will help female executives achieve the desired aptitudes that allow them to become effective at their work. However, in reality, there exists a range of stressors in the life of a working woman especially if she is married and even those who are not are still subject to some form of social pressure that cause them to temporarily shift focus from their work. This explains why they constantly check upon their loved ones perhaps more often than their male counterparts and this temporary dissociation accounts for low productivity at times.

Female executives also need to exhibit skills competency of a practical nature and knowledge competency that enables them to think critically about their work. However, according to research findings, the workplace is not free of cognitive dissonance and this contributes to low managerial and intellectual competencies as many factors intervene to stop the effective delivery of creative, conceptual and strategic skills needed for upward job mobility.

Research evidence demonstrates that successful female executives ought to exhibit job knowledge competency where they are able to fully execute the tasks set forth for them as part of their job description. This occurs when they are able to continuously learn as part of their job but given the absence of appropriate mentorship it is clear the female executives will always struggle for direction in their job. Evidence showed that female executives suffer from lack of top leadership support (mentorship) and insubordination especially where males were involved.

For success, female executives would need to demonstrate emotional competency manifests itself through emotional self-awareness, emotional awareness of others, emotional reasoning, emotional influence and emotional control. However, research evidence demonstrated that the workplace environment creates a condition of nervous disposition that tends to affect the proper development of emotional competency on the part of the female executive. As a result, they are unable to pick the benefits associated with emotional intelligence such as being able to control subordinates, effective message delivery and getting rid of stress while at work. This in turn contributes to negative energy at work resulting in relatively poor performance that stands in the way of leadership aspirations.

### **Strategies for dealing with threats to female executive leadership aspirations**

The study noted that the government was largely to blame for the gender imbalance across most organisations in Zimbabwe and this could be solved through repealing current gender legislation. This would entail the creation of a new legislative regime that aims to fully empower women as compared to the current statutes that seem to demonstrate a chauvinistic stance towards female employment and empowerment. The government is therefore showing little interest in developing policies that work for female executives and the process of law making itself is a very long one.

Further, organisations are mandated to address issues of gender disparity by reworking their existing gender policies and institute affirmative action which would favour female ascendancy up the corporate ladder. This would however create potential conflict of interest given that males are also vying for the same positions and authority.

Other views were that women should form support groups which give solidarity to fellow women requiring such support but this is only possible in the context where more women are available to fill up the groups. Presently, there are very few organisations that can effectively marshal executive women towards a common frame of reference. Other respondents claimed that qualifying women should simply be promoted

to positions of influence regardless of their sex but there is little to compel organisations to respect this point of view in as much as organisations are not mandated to employ women or promote them on the basis of education. Organisations are under no compulsion to promote a female candidate simply because they have acquired a qualification or an education because within the same organisation exists males who are equally educated.

Other suggestions were that women should be given loans for start-ups and this point resonates with the setting of independent standards by women. This would take the fight away from the organisation towards small establishments set by the women. Such organisations will not only suffer competition from established businesses but they will compel women to forget vying for top leadership of existing organisations. The mentorship of women was also suggested as a lucrative opportunity for female upward mobility but the absence of appropriate mentors and mentorship programs presents a real challenge for female executives.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the above, several recommendations can be proffered:

- Women are urged to come together to lobby collectively for the improvement of their working conditions by compelling their organisations to fully embrace affirmative action programs.
- The government is recommended to craft more gender inclusive legislation that will result in getting rid of gender stereotypes that afflict female job seekers.
- The government should put in place a sexual harassment policy to deter abuse of females by men at work.
- Organisations are urged to craft gender policies that they respect and guide the operations relative to recruitment, promotion and secondment of labour.
- Males are recommended to become more tolerant towards female job seekers and create an enabling working environment in which female talent can be nurtured.

## Areas of further study

Other researchers could consider the issues of gender relative to female upward mobility through expanding the research into other areas not touched by this current research which considered the issue from the perspective of Zimbabwe's financial educational, agricultural, mining and State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs). A much broader investigation would provide a more reliable basis for generalisation of research findings as the current research could be considered rather selective and narrow.

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