

Barriers And Best Practices For Achieving And Sustaining Gender Equality In The Workplace In A Globalised World

¹NUHU, Rhoda Ayeye and ²UGHEOKE, Monica Ladi

¹Department of Library Studies, School of General Studies
Federal Polytechnic, Kaura-Namoda
Zamfara State, Nigeria

²Department of Science Laboratory Technology
Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi,
Edo State, Nigeria.

ABSTRACT

Gender equality between men and women has brought about the concept that every individual is free to develop their own abilities, make choices and decide what they want without the limitations set by prejudices, stereotypes and rigid gender roles. It is achieved when women and men, girls and boys, have equal rights to go into the workplace to excel, and the power to shape their own lives and contribute to the growth of the workplace and society positively. In order to promote gender equality in the workplace, this paper is confirmatory as it seeks to explore best practices and policies for achieving sustainable gender equality. The paper reviewed some issues on gender equality. It discussed that some of the barriers to gender equality include: conflict, pay gap/salary, top leadership positions, lack of gender policies in organizations, lack of female role models or mentors, sexual violence and exploitation, absence of gender and work life balance. In addition, the best practices suggested for reducing gender barriers include: equal pay for the jobs or roles which are the same; no barriers for women to participate fully in the workplace; no discrimination against women with regards to their family and caregiving responsibilities; equal access to leadership positions, gender mainstreaming, gendered social responsibility and gender networking among others. It is recommended that workplace managers should adopt some of the aforementioned practices and be committed to take the necessary actions and guidelines to enforce them.

Keywords: Gender, Gender Equality, Barriers, Best Practices, Sustainable Development

INTRODUCTION

Gender equality means that women and men have the same rights, responsibilities and opportunities in all areas of life. Also, gender equality is a driver for economic growth and development. However, women still face a gender bias especially in the workforce. Despite the best efforts of companies to promote diversity and equality, women still dominate the lower paying administrative ranks, while men continue to dominate at the executive level. This inequality is a problem to corporate performance. The aim of gender equality in the workplace is to achieve broadly equal opportunities and outcomes for women and men. Gender diversity will bring more innovation, creativity and problem-solving abilities [1]. Furthermore, they stated that despite the fact that women make up nearly half the workforce and that they are better equipped than men when they enter the labour market, the proportion of women at all levels of economic management and decision-making worldwide is lower than that of men.

The Nigerian workforce for example, exhibits a high level of gender inequality [2]. He added that Nigeria has one of the lowest rates of employed women,

compared to other selected countries like Ghana and Egypt with similar gross national income. Gender equality, centered in human rights, is both a development goal on its own and a critical factor for achieving sustainable development. It underlies one of the guiding principles which is, the concept of 'leaving no one behind' by 2030 in the Agenda for sustainable development by the United Nations. Non-Governmental organizations for example United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) believes that the gender inequalities and discriminatory attitudes and practices that hold women back, must be confronted and eliminated, if we are to leave no one behind by 2030[3].

Therefore, this paper is confirmatory in nature as it simply attempts to achieve the following objectives: a) provide conceptual clarifications on the term gender and gender inequality; b) explore the positions of previous scholars on gender equality barriers and best practices in ameliorating gender inequality. The positions made in this study would contribute to knowledge as the recommendations and insights from this paper could guide policy decisions by the government, workplace managers and even spur

prospective researchers to take further investigations on gender equality barriers within their immediate locality. In other to achieve the aforementioned objectives; the rest of this paper is divided into four parts namely: conceptual issues, Barriers and Best Practices, Discussions and Conclusions.

Conceptual Issues

Gender and sex are two terms that are often used interchangeable or synonymously in the academia. The former (gender) is a sociological construct that refers to a wide range of biological, emotional mental, behavioural, and physical characteristics that can be attributed to “maleness” or “femaleness” of an individual while the latter (sex) is the biological classification of all individuals into two mutually exclusive outcomes of male or females based on their “XX”, ‘XY- chromosome make up respectively. Gender is the range of physical, biological, mental and behavioural characteristics pertaining to and differentiating between the feminine and masculine (female and male) population [4]. According to them, the importance of socioeconomic issues in relation to gender is based primarily on the socio-cultural differences between girls and boys that often make people attribute some vocations and professions such as engineering, construction works, arts and crafts, etc to men while catering, typing, nursing, secretarial duties are classified as a female domain. Perhaps, these socio-cultural differences may be responsible for what is known as gender inequality in the world of work in contemporary times.

Gender inequality is a type of sex discrimination which results in a particular individual being treated disadvantageously because of their gender. This is something which has plagued women in the workplace for a long time now, and still persists despite all the efforts women’s rights movements have made. It must also be noted that while gender inequality is something that mainly women have to deal with, there are some men who have had to deal with the issue of gender inequality. Thus, the vision of gender equality by 2030 by the United Nations for example, will require urgent action to eliminate the many root causes of discrimination and barriers that still limit women’s rights in private and public spheres of business and organisation. For example, discriminatory laws need to change and legislation adopted to proactively advance equality. With stepped up action and implementation of some best practices on gender equality, every part of the world can make progress towards sustainable development by 2030, leaving no one behind [3].

Gender inequality or segregation has created some kind of imaginary “glass ceiling” that impedes both sexes from advancing professionally and economically [5]. [6] noted that gender inequality, which is sometimes called sex discrimination, means

receiving unequal treatment based solely on gender. Women are most commonly the subject of gender inequality in the workplace. There are still improvements to be made. Thus, Understanding gender inequality is a step toward eliminating it from the modern workplace.

Gender discrimination or inequality in the work place is the unfavorable treatment of someone (an employee or a job applicant) because of gender. It is important to understand the causes, effects and solutions for gender inequality, so as to maximise the full skills and talents of the workforce. The challenge now is to generate sustainable job creating growth, and strengthen institutions, to promote accountability and enable equitable gender distribution of the benefits of that growth. This is because there are still huge inequalities in the labour market in some regions in the world [5]. This is quite undemocratic and disrespectful to human right.

Generally, democracy as a system of government has gained more popularity now in the contemporary societies than in the years past [6]. The reasons for this development is not disconnected with the fact that democratic system recognizes respect of citizen’s opinion, equality of participation in decision making, support for human dignity and right irrespective of gender or social class. Despite the preaching of “gender equality and women empowerment” and “women emancipation” by international agencies like the United nations, and even the general commitment to the principle of non-discrimination as enshrined in Section 2 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic, Nigeria still falls short of the desired result of giving men and women equal opportunities to advance socially, physically, educationally, and politically [7]. For instance, women constitute about fifty percent (50%) of the Nigerian population and over 70% of them - mothers, wives and even workers may be described as rural. However, many of these women are culture-bound when related to men in matters of wealth, power and prestige [8].

Best practices on gender equality are thereby necessary because, gender equality helps drive up economic growth and development across the board[5]. Some non-governmental organizations and civil right societies have policies and have developed strategies to curb gender inequality. This is because barriers still exist in the treatment of issues concerning gender. There are still huge inequalities in the labour market in some regions, with women systematically denied equal access to jobs. [9]submitted that to provide equal opportunities to both women and men within a workplace especially at decision-making levels, organizations needs to focus on gathering global evidence to inform the identification of trends, good practices and challenges in terms of gender balance in the workplace.

Barriers and Best Practices

Some barriers to gender equality are: (i) conflict (ii) pay gap /salary (iii) top leadership positions(iv) lack of gender policies in organizations (v) lack of female role models or mentors (vi) sexual violence and exploitation (vii) absence of gender and work life balance and others. Some best practices are suggested for each of the barriers discussed.

i) **Conflict:** Inequality can generate internal conflict. Gender discrimination may seem like a minor problem in the workplace, but it increases conflict and tension among the team members. Another effect of gender discrimination is that female employees will feel less motivated to do their job, because they do not feel valued by their supervisors. This can hinder productivity. Unless gender barrier are tackled as a priority, they have the potential to generate and exacerbate conflict. The relationship between gender inequality, other forms of inequality and conflict needs to be researched on. Furthermore, there is a general consensus that high levels of inequality can, if unchecked, ferment internal conflict [10].

ii)

iii) **Pay gap/salary:** Gender discrimination exists in many different forms: paying people of different genders differently for doing the same job, hiring and training only one gender for a particular type of work because it has the reputation of being termed "man's work" or "woman's work", refusing to promote a pregnant woman because of the pregnancy, and even sexual harassment [10] [11]. Both men and women benefit when gender equality is practiced in the workplace. Promoting that equality take the commitment of management to take the necessary actions, establish guidelines and enforce them. Other income disparities can be traced to workplace gender discrimination in both the private and public sectors. For example, the pay gap between male and female bank managers is significant [12]. [13] submitted that among workers who were in the labour force for at least 27 weeks in 2011, more women (5.5 million) than men (4.9 million) lived below the official poverty level. [14] stated that despite some advances, women still suffer gender discrimination in the workplace, especially when it comes to pay. Gender discrimination in terms of gender pay gap is a persistent problem in the U.S., but it is especially a challenge in the developing world, where women's rights have not advanced. [12] stated that strategies adopted by the European Union (EU) for equality between women and men are: equal economic independence for women and men; equal pay for work of equal value; equality in decision-making; dignity, integrity and ending gender-based violence; and promoting gender equality beyond the EU.

iv)

iii) **Top leadership positions:** [15] stated that women are still vastly underrepresented among top leadership in business and in other organizations.

Globally, most companies and organisations have absolutely no women in management or executive position or on their board. Half of all global companies do not have a single female top executive. Programmes that initiate increase targeted recruitment, skills coaching and leadership education for women in the workplace should be encouraged. Also, women are increasingly advancing to positions of organizational and political leadership, the vast majority of these positions are still held by men [5]. [15] suggested gender networking as a best practice to gender equality. They drew on empirical material about professorial appointments in Dutch academia and analyse the accounts of gatekeepers illuminating their networking practices. The aim of their study is to build a theoretical framework to understand how gendered networking practices produce or counter inequalities in organizations. The result of their study show which networking practices gatekeepers routinely use in recruitment and how these networking practices are intertwined with gender practices. They used the notion of mobilizing masculinities to understand the self-evident identification of men gatekeepers with men in their networks and to understand how both men and women gatekeepers prefer the male candidates that resemble the proven masculine success model. Furthermore, their study provides the first empirical insights in mobilizing femininities in which women search for and support women candidates. They show how the gender practice of mobilizing femininities is a more precarious and marked practice than mobilizing masculinities. Mobilizing femininities in networking is intended to counter gender inequalities, but is only partially successful.

Therefore, all research workplaces are urged to establish a Gender Equality Committee, with staff representatives from every level of the organisation, male and female. The role of the Gender Equality Committee is to define whether problems exist in a department, institute or university (for which an anonymous survey may be the instrument of choice), to ensure a commitment from management and staff to "make things better", and to design a realistic approach to any issues in an achievable time frame.

Organisations should ensure that there are female representative(s) on all committees; especially promotion panels and committees that influence policy development. The contributions from women should be welcomed, and women and men should be assigned responsibilities of equal importance [16]. Furthermore, in tertiary institutions for example, increase women's representation at conferences by creating a register of potential female speakers and session chairs. This register could be coordinated through professional societies or through the host institute. It may even become policy that any sponsorship given towards a conference can only be

given on the provision that there is strong female representation of invited speakers, working towards 50% equality in committees.

Another best practice is that Gendered Social Responsibility (GSR) can be considered. This is the incorporation of gender equality objectives into all the different social responsibility initiatives implemented by an organisation that is, implementation of equal opportunities for women and men through GSR practices and initiatives deployed both internally and externally. This means that existing relationships between organisations and their stakeholders must be interpreted from a gender perspective [1] [16]. In addition, they researched on the impact of having women in management positions and the effect they may have on corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. They suggested that many agree that gender equality practices should be factored into the broader framework of CSR. Their paper examined how the presence of women on corporate boards, in top and middle management and as heads of CSR departments, influences gender equality practices in the field of CSR. They used information collected from questionnaires from companies that have signed up to Women's Empowerment Principles in Spain; they discovered that the presence of women in the management position has a positive impact on CSR activities with gender equality objectives. They recommended the incorporation of women into not only corporate boards but all management positions.

iv) Lack of gender policies: Currently, there are more women in public office than ever before, but encouraging implantation of gender policies in the work place and in leadership, will help strengthen policies and legislation for greater gender equality. Companies that are transparent about policies, goals and statistics are likely to achieve workplace equality much faster. Establish a policy that ensures that men and women are compensated equally for performing the same work [10]. Beyond equal pay for equal work, the policy should also ensure that both genders are treated equally in recruitment, training, hiring and promotion. The best practice suggested by [5], [6] is to increase awareness about the existence of gender equality policies in order to dispel any lingering gender biases which may exist. Once that is done, strides can be made towards offering women the same opportunities, salaries, and positions as their male counterparts.

Furthermore, training is essential at all levels of an organization for employees to become educated about the advantages of gender equality. This helps to reduce gender biases and stereotypes training on gender equality to management personnel. Educate managers in both the obvious and the subtle discrimination that takes place in business and

organisations. Managers should be taught how to identify discrimination when it takes place among their staff, how to deal with the situation and how to prevent it from happening in the future. Also, management should be train on how to interpret and implement gender policies and best practices.

More so, [17] noted that gender mainstreaming was established as a major global strategy for the promotion of gender equality in the Beijing Platform for Action from the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Since gender mainstreaming is binding and requires integrating the gender perspective into every step of policy processes, it has to be applied as a cross-cutting, horizontal principle. The following five principles hold true for all gender mainstreaming activities and implementation measures. These include: gender-sensitive language; gender-specific data collection and analysis; equal access to services; women and men are equally involved in decision making; equal treatment is integrated into steering processes example, quality management and gender budgeting, amongst others. In Sweden for example, Sweden's first gender equality law was passed in 1979, mandating equality between women and men in the labour market [13]. The United Nations turned promises into action by proposing the attainment of gender equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". UN Women's new flagship report, provides a comprehensive and authoritative assessment of progress, gaps and challenges in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from a gender perspective [3].

v) Lack of female role models or male champions (mentors): [2] submitted that female employees often lack access to mentors because there are few women in senior roles to serve as mentors, and men are less likely to mentor young women. Mentors can help female recruits gain the skills and experiences they need to advance in the workplace. The best practices may be to showcase your company's successful women as models to other aspiring women to emulate. Such women should be show cased either physically or through newsletters as a demonstrative effort to promote gender equality.

In addition, women in leadership roles can play a huge role in inspiring and recruiting other talented and driven women. Make mentors available to everyone. Example, female role models at the senior levels are not always available, but where they exist they can assist their younger counterparts in their professional development. Bringing women in professionals for example, together and highlighting their contributions through lectures, seminars or conferences are a great way to expose women to more role models. Furthermore, encourage women to enter fields which may have traditionally been male

dominated and eliminate hostility in the workplace. Publicize your efforts to promote gender equality [18]. Whether it is on your company website, in newspaper editorials or advertisements, let other companies, your vendors and the local workforce know about your dedication to equality in the workplace. Become a role model for other businesses or organizations.

v) **Sexual violence and exploitation:** Sexual harassment has been recognized as discrimination on the grounds of sex and as a breach of the principle of equal treatment between men and women, and its practical realization, in both the law and research. [19] noted that sexual harassment is recognized as discrimination on the grounds of sex and as a breach of the principle of equal treatment between men and women. Violence prevention efforts often have focused on changing men's attitudes, rather than also seeking to transform structural and institutional inequalities. A critical assessment is necessary for the future prevention of men's violence against women. Best practice suggested is to establish a policy that strictly and specifically forbids any form of sexual harassment. Either in the policy itself, or in a related human resources procedure, describe in detail the professional consequences that will result from harassment. Another solution is to hold seminars and sessions for your male employees, so that they understand the signs and consequences of gender discrimination. This can help the men in company become allies of female employees, thereby creating a more collaborative, positive work environment.

vii) **Absence of gender and work life balance system:** This is an area in which both men and women negotiate the relationship between work and home life, particularly when they have caring responsibilities at home. It explores the relationship between formal policies and their impact on men and women's ability to affect a choice in shaping their careers and their day-to-day commitments. As a result of absence of gender and work life balance system, managers especially women have to make choices about work and family. Women have to develop strategies that enable them either to conform to or bypass organizational norms [20].

In addition, work-life programmes that allow employees to have a greater involvement at home appear to be linked to employee wellbeing for men as well as women. Therefore, organizations can benefit in a number of ways, including reduced absenteeism and better integration of women returners after maternity. Also, Work-life balance measures can present opportunities for organizations to learn new ways of working and reduction of role conflict. [21] noted that many contemporary studies of 'work-life balance' either ignore gender or take it for granted.

They conducted semi-structured interviews with men and women in mid-life (aged 50 to 52 years) in order to compare their experiences of work-life balance. They concluded that gender remains embedded in the ways that respondents negotiate home and work life. They suggested that absence sometimes of gender-sensitive work environments and family-friendly systems may impede organizational effectiveness.

The best practice suggested in the workplace is that employees should be provided with quality, on-site child care facilities for both mothers and fathers that work at the company. The human resources department and management personnel should provide family leave for both men and women [11]. In addition, [22] stated that reducing gender gaps in the world of work can yield broad development dividends: improving child health and education, enhancing poverty reduction, and catalyzing productivity. Empowering women and girls is vital in order to achieve our twin goals: ending extreme poverty by 2030 and boosting shared prosperity.

DISCUSSIONS

Gender equality is not a "woman's issue" but a human rights issue. If gender is not integrated from the outset of the process in the workplace, it will structurally determine that gender does not receive necessary attention and priority throughout the remainder of the process. Therefore, a gendered lens must be applied holistically throughout the processes. That is, in the goals, policies, design, remits, reviews, analyses, decision making in an organization. Gender parity should be a priority in all institutions and processes. Ideally, in order to achieve gender equality in the workplace, companies should strive to provide broadly the same outcomes and privileges to both men and women.

Some of the best practices suggested for reducing gender barriers include: equal pay for the jobs or roles which are the same; no barriers for women to participate fully in the workplace; no discrimination against women with regards to their family and caregiving responsibilities; Equal access to leadership positions, gender mainstreaming, gendered social responsibility, gender networking and others. This is supported by [3], [13] and [16]. A world where gender equality is a reality means that you will be able to decide your career path based on your interests, not what society expects of you. In the workplace, gender should never limit your opportunities or life choices. A gender equal world would enable everyone to just be who they want to be without worrying about stereotypes. In this "ideal world", rights and pay would be equal and discrimination would be diminished. Workers, both men and women will be valued for their work ethic.

CONCLUSION

Gender equality is achieved when women and men, girls and boys, have equal rights, life prospects and opportunities to go into the work place to excel, and the power to shape their own lives and contribute to the growth of the workplace and society positively. There are a number of approaches that organizations can take to prevent barriers to gender equality. Barriers and discriminatory laws need to change and legislation adopted to proactively advance gender equality through enforcing some best practices on gender equality. It is therefore recommended that commitment of management to take the necessary actions, establish policies trainings and guidelines on gender equality and enforcing them is necessary.

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