

Gender and Career Advancement in the Workplace: An Assessment of the Experiences of Women in Higher Education Management

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Abstract

This paper explores the concerns of gender and career advancement in the work place; specifically how women perceive workplace processes as inhibiting factors to women's advancement into top ranking administrative positions in Higher Education (HE) management. Interviews were conducted based on approximately thirty open-ended questions adopted from similar interview questions conducted by Bell and Nkomo (2001) and Roth (2006). Data gathered covered interviews with ten women academic and administrative professionals in five public universities in Ghana and these were used to assess gender segregation and the way it has affected the individuals and their careers. The findings from the study revealed that there are processes at the institutional levels that are perceived to hinder qualified women from ascending to senior positions in higher education.

Keywords: Administrators, Administrative Professionals, Advancement, Gender, Segregation,

1. Introduction

All over the world, gender differences in the labour market have been persistent over time, all the major labour market indicators clearly point to the obvious gender differences in the market. In many countries, participation rate of women has generally lagged behind the rate for men on account of the high commitment of women to household activities and the Ghanaian labour market is no exception. Surprisingly, the 2000s saw a relatively higher labour force participation and employment rates for women than men based on the Ghana Living Standard Survey. This is clearly emphasised in the 2010 population census which puts the participation rate of women at 46.1% as against 47.6% for men. Gender differences in the Ghanaian labour market have incidentally been a subject of debate over the past two decades and beyond.

The continuous and gradual decline in the difference between female and male employment rates could be partly linked to the improved educational attainment of females lately. Between 2004 and 2010, the proportion of females in tertiary institutions increased from 0.7% to 3.2% while post-secondary also increased from 0.8% to 2.4%. The gender difference with regard to the rate of employment is lower for females than males in Ghana. Analysts have attributed this to the high domestic commitments of females, which tend to prevent them from working more hours and thus making it less likely to make them become visibly under-employed. Women are heavily represented in the informal sectors of the economy, which are also largely not formalised and so the numbers of females in active formal sector employment tend to be low.

The situation in employment in Higher Education (HE) in Ghana is not entirely different from employment in other sectors of the economy. Studies on women's participation in HE management have indicated that sex is a common barrier for women's career advancement in the academic workplace; institutional factors contribute to gender inequalities with resulting effects on earning gaps and prospects for career mobility (Chang, 2000; Kulis, 2002; Singh and Vinnicombe, 2003 & Gold, 2003).

1.1 Problem Statement

In Ghana, women constitute slightly over one-half (51%) of the total population and form a critical portion of the human resource base. However, available data indicates that they are inadequately represented in senior management positions in public institutions where policies that affect them are made (Boateng, 2006). A statistical overview report of Ghanaian institutions by Ardayfio-Schandorf, (2005) provides a comprehensive picture of the participation of women in Ghanaian Universities. Her report reveals that in Ghana the percentage of women in the both teaching and administrative-management positions were increasingly low as they moved up the occupational ladder. Among the very top positions women comprised 9.5 percent, while most universities had never had women vice-chancellors at the time. A study by Darko (2008) on women's employment level, opportunities and career advancement in selected public institutions revealed that, in the appointed administrative posts, women were lacking.

These studies reveal that in spite of the fact that in HE institutions formal qualifications and merit are essential for a career and progression, women are still underrepresented in top management and this situation has been linked to the existence of forms of inequalities. In spite of the institution of policies aimed at increasing the participation of women in management, the position of women has not changed much.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

In seeking to explain the underrepresentation of women in higher education management, this paper seeks to assess how gendered assumptions affect women and to find out the factors affecting women's participation in Higher Education (HE) management and to ascertain whether prejudices regarding gender occur in the professional setting and how it hinders women's advancement into top ranking management positions.

2. Literature Review: Gender Segregation

Gender segregation refers to the tendency of women and men to work in different sectors and occupations. It relates to the different work that men and women do as a consequence of their patterns of socialisation, identifying tasks traditionally seen as 'women's work' or 'men's work'. It is the tendency for men and women to be employed in different occupations across the entire spectrum of jobs caused by gender bias based on stereotypical, biological and social differences between men and women (Duncan, 2009). Frequently segregation is used in a broad sense, as a term to include both segregation in a narrower sense and concentration (Fiss, 2006). It is a concept that is inherently symmetrical. Concentration is about the sex composition of the workforce in an occupation or set of occupations, whereas segregation refers to the separation of the two sexes across occupations (Gold, 2003).

Occupational gender segregation has been at the heart of debates about gender inequality. High levels of segregation have been considered to be a significant factor in the discrepancy between the wages of women and men, to impose constraints on careers, and generally to be at the root of gender inequalities (Forret, 2004; Reskin and Roos, 2000). Segregation in the stricter, narrower sense is regarded as evidence of inequality, or even as directly measuring inequality. This is clearly not correct, as concentration of the sexes in different occupations does not necessarily mean that either is disadvantaged. The inequalities of segregation are primarily located in market employment, but they spill over into all aspects of life. Thus, the subject raises significant questions of social justice, of the efficient utilisation of human resources, of the structuring of labour markets, and of wider social aspects of work and family life. This issue of inequality can be addressed through a distinction between the vertical and horizontal dimensions of segregation (Reskin, 2000).

Horizontal segregation is understood as under (over) representation of a certain group in occupations or sectors not ordered by any criterion (Hoel, 2009). Horizontal segregation refers to the concentration of women and men in professions or sectors of economic activity. It is where the workforce of a specific industry or sector is mostly made up of one particular gender. An example of horizontal segregation can be found in construction, where men make up the majority of the industry's workforce, whereas childcare is almost exclusively a female occupation. Vertical segregation on the other hand is where opportunities for career progression within a sector for a particular gender are narrowed. This type of segregation affects women far more than men. For example, women are less likely to work as managers or senior officials than men (Reskin, 2000). Vertical occupational segregation exists when men and women both work in the same job categories, but men commonly do the more skilled, responsible or better paid work. For example, the majority of school heads may be men while the majority of teachers are women.

The majority of hospital consultants may be men while the majority of nurses may be women (Hakim, 2001). In the literature, vertical segregation is referred to by the “glass ceiling” which indicates the existence of visible or invisible obstacles that lead to a certain rarity of women in power and decision positions (Acker, 2002). This concept describes the forces that tend to maintain women at the lowest levels in the organisational pyramid (Gash, 2008).

2.1 The Status of Women on the Labour Market

Traditionally, the labour force has been a ‘man’s world’ and as such has been male dominated. Labour force feminisation emerged from what Hudson-Weems (2009) terms a tripartite or threefold shroud of oppression consisting of racism, classism, and sexism. Women’s filtration into the labour force ascended after World War II as a result of the need to earn incomes to support families (Gold, 2008). Women occupied lower rank positions which required less educational experiences and practice.

However, after the United Nations (UN) women’s decade (1975-1995) and the Beijing Conference (2005), there has been an increasing awareness of the worth and importance of the woman. Consequently, there has been a tremendous increase in the proportion of women in the labour force. The history of women in management positions can best be described as a struggle for survival and identity coupled with the need and desire to protect and support the family. The supply of women qualified for management jobs began to increase as more women accumulated work experience in organisations and completed management and professional training programmes. However, a 2008 study has shown that at the organisational level, management jobs are still dominated by men and that women occupy a small percentage of management positions (Gold, 2008). Average female participation in management jobs remains very low, with women significantly under-represented in senior positions and clustered in industries and occupations that are segregated by gender. Linda Wirth, author of a 2007 International Labour Organisation (ILO) report regarding women’s corporate progress, states that “almost universally, women have failed to reach leading positions in major corporations irrespective of their abilities. Women generally fare best in industries employing large numbers of women, such as health and community services and the hotel and catering industry” (Wirth, 2007).

Female managers in every organisation remain a tiny fraction of those in senior positions (Linehan, 2002) and, although female managers have high levels of education and a desire to progress in their careers, it remains the case that few achieve the same status as their male counterparts even in advanced economies (Meyerson and Fletcher, 2002; Wellington, Kropf and Gerkovich, 2003). In 2000, the concept of “glass ceiling” pervaded the literature to describe the paucity of women and minorities heading public and private sector organisations (Maume, 2004). The term was earlier used by Morrison, White and Veslor (1997) in their fascinating book “*Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Can Women Reach the Top of America’s Largest Corporations?*” that gave new insight to the issues women face in their journey through the executive echelons of the corporate organisations. Subsequently, the term “glass-ceiling-effect” became synonymous worldwide with the struggles women face in attempting to move up to the senior, executive and top management positions in corporate organisations (Wirth, 2001). Thus, the failure of women and other minority groups in climbing up the corporate ladder, despite seeing the top jobs, but still not reaching them due to discriminatory barriers, have been linked to segregation in the labour market (Maume, 2004). The fact that occupational gender segregation exists globally shows that even with a focus on equality and with various strategies promoting equality between the sexes, there is still a long way to go before achieving equality between men and women in the labour market.

2.2 The Position of Women in Higher Educational Management

The position of women in higher education management cannot be treated in isolation from the general status of women in society (Hammoud, 2002). Throughout history, women have had only a limited role in society with restricted opportunities (Vanderslice and Litsch, 2008). Even in this new era, this harsh reality somehow remains true, and gender inequalities continue to primarily disadvantage women, who suffer much more from the discrimination that occurs to both genders (ESU, 2008). The education sector, including its highest level in its ladder, meaning Higher Education (HE), has been also influenced by ‘the women’s issue’, even though the academia has been perceived itself as progressive part of society (ESU, 2008). In the area of higher education, both in teaching and management, women are still a long way from participating on the same footing as men. Women have made some progress in achieving parity in teaching but are grossly underrepresented in higher education management.

A report in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (THES) talks of the ‘snail’ pace at which women's academic prospects are improving globally (Gold, 2008). The higher education sector is characterised by specific aspects that make it distinguishable from the business world. However, in higher education, as well as in business, men and masculine values are dominant (Whitehead, 2001). Research abounds especially in Europe and North America showing the status of women in management and more so in higher education management. Such research is beginning to attract the attention of research in developing countries. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) female entrance in higher education institutions in Africa have increased to nearly 45% in 2011. However, the participation rate of women at senior management level in higher education is relatively low. The senior management level, in this study, refers to academic and administrative professionals such as professors, senior lecturers, senior researchers, registrars, deputy registrars, finance officers, deputy finance officers and other analogous positions in higher education institutions.

In country after country women hold less than fifty percent of academic and administrative posts in higher education institutions (Dines, 2003). They are best represented in lower level academic and middle management positions and their participation relative to men decreases at successively higher levels. Representation varies between about ten and twenty percent at middle management level and from naught to ten percent at senior management level (Stolte-Heiskanen, 2001). Representation in the committee system follows a similar pattern with women more likely to be members of departmental and faculty committees than on governing boards or councils. A consequence of this pattern of decreasing representation at successively higher levels is that senior women frequently find themselves isolated in hierarchies which are predominantly male (Hammoud, 2002). Possible explanations for the underrepresentation of women in higher education management have been related to labour market differences, gender discrimination and segregation, cultural perceptions among other things. A Commonwealth Educational Management survey report (Lund, 2008) provides a comprehensive picture of the participation of women in Commonwealth Universities. The report reveals that across the Commonwealth the percentage of women in the administrative-management positions were increasingly low as they moved up the occupational ladder. Among the very top positions women comprised only 6.9% of the executive heads (vice-chancellors), while many countries had no women vice-chancellors, confirming that ‘for Commonwealth Universities the phrase “man at the top” is still depressingly valid’ (Lund, 2008: 36-7).

The low percentage of women in these positions reflect the fact that these positions are awarded to fairly senior staff, of whom women form a small percentage. With hardly an exception, the global picture is one of men outnumbering women at about five to one at middle management level and about twenty to one at senior management level (Dines, 2003). This debate has continued into the 21st century. In the case of Ghanaian academic workplace this is of great interest as there are various gender policies and welfare strategies in place, yet vertical gender segregation remains resilient.

Acker (2004) states that the problems which women encounter in reaching top positions in higher education institutions have received much attention in recent publications. Acker is of the view that academic life is a sphere where in theory women should find few barriers to opportunity. If there is anywhere that women professionals should be successful, then it is in the universities. The reality seems to be that academia has been perceived as traditionally elitist, male and patriarchal in its workplace culture, structure and values. According to Acker (2004), three perspectives explain the continuing under representation of women in senior administrative positions:

1. The first perspective is *person-centred* in which the paucity of women is attributed to the psycho-social attributes, including personality characteristics, attitudes and behavioural skills of women themselves. The problem is vested in the individual and she is called upon to adapt herself to the traditional, male concept of management within the academy. Focus is on the need for women to adapt-to compensate for their socialisation deficits. Among personal factors are lack of self-esteem and self-confidence; limited aspirations in the field of management, lack of motivation and ambition to accept challenges to go up the ladder; women's orientation to interpersonal relations with peers which could impede their upward mobility; promoted myths regarding women's low potential for leadership, being less assertive, less emotionally stable and lacking ability to handle a crisis (Bond, 2006).
2. The alternative perspective, the *structure-centred* paradigm advances the view that it is the disadvantageous position of women in the organisational structure (few numbers, little power, limited access to resources) which shapes and defines the behaviour of women.

The underlying premise of this perspective is that men and women are equally capable and committed to assuming positions of leadership. The problem is vested in the structure and the remedy is a fundamental change to eliminate inappropriate discrimination in institutional policies and practices. Among structural factors may be listed discriminatory appointment and promotion practices, male resistance to women in management positions, absence of policies and legislation to ensure participation of women, and limited opportunities for leadership training and for demonstrating competence as a result of the power structure in the workplace (Bond, 2006).

3. Smulders (2008) explores the *culture-centred* approach which links gender centred and organisational structure perspective. Her analysis is concerned with social construction of gender and assignment of specific roles, responsibilities, and expectations to women and to men. These gender-based roles, irrelevant to the workplace, are carried into the workplace. Higher education institutions therefore reproduce gender differences 'via their internal structures and everyday practices' because of the cultural perceptions which determine the attitudes and behaviours of individual men and women and form barriers to the equal participation of women in senior management. Smulders (2008) concludes that 'gender relations are kept in place because the actors involved, both dominant and subordinate, subscribe to social and organisational reality'.

The focus of this study is to examine the actual situation women employed in the selected occupational groups are experiencing in relation to factors such as opportunity and constraints looking at gender inequality regimes and how institutional processes produce unequal outcomes for the sexes. The conceptual framework is based on the findings presented in the literature review. The framework reveals that gender is a foundational element of organisational structure and present in organisational processes, practices, images and ideologies, and distributions of power. This process could occur at any organisational level (structure, ideology, policy and practice, interaction, and identity), and gender can be invoked by organisations through such mechanisms as collegial, informal recruiting practices or the promulgation of policies that place a premium on gendered characteristics, such as gendered division of labour, gendered interaction and communication, gendered symbols, images and forms of consciousness and gendered actions and interactions. Cultural expectations and stereotypes are recognised as important reasons for the lack of equality. In addition to these, strong gender stereotypes and power relations hinders opportunities for women to climb higher on the occupational ladder.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a survey research design. Data to assess gender segregation and women's advancement issues were gathered by means of semi structured interviews with the possibility to adapt depending on the situation. An interview schedule was designed such that each section focused on a specific theme. The themes for the questions were based on issues emerging from the literature review, review of policy documents, institutional and national data.

3.1 Study Participants

Ten academic and administrative professional women selected from five universities in Ghana were interviewed for the study. The participants of the study were women employed in both teaching and non-teaching occupations in the selected universities. They included women employees within the academic and administrative hierarchies. Two women were selected from each university; one each from two analogous hierarchies (academic and administrative). Women occupying senior academic and administrative/professional staff positions were purposively selected for interviews. Only senior academic and administrative/professional staff with the rank of senior lecturer and analogous positions and above and who had worked at the university for a period of more than five years was included in the sample. This was to ensure validity of information received as issues of tenure and promotions are attained over specific time periods.

3.2 Data Collection

Interviews were conducted to gather data for the study. The interviews were conducted based on approximately thirty open-ended questions adopted from similar interview questions conducted by Bell and Nkomo (2001) and Roth (2006). The questions were open-ended covering topics ranging from the women's personal background and education to her current professional position to her personal family life. Depending on the responses given to previous questions, some questions were omitted, specific to each interview. This format was selected because it allowed each participant to reveal a depth of information not available through a survey method. It was selected also to allow each participant to provide detail about her perceptions of her gendered work experiences.

4. Results of the Study

This was a qualitative descriptive study whose general purpose was to assess how gendered processes and assumptions affect women's participation in Higher Education (HE) management and to ascertain whether inequities regarding gender occur in the professional setting and how it hinders women's advancement into top ranking management positions and investigate how ten women senior academic and administrative professionals in Universities in Ghana perceived their journey to their current positions.

4.1 Appraisal of Study Participants' Demographic Data

In terms of age, seven of the women were forty years old and above, while three participants were 44 years or below. Regarding the type of institution, six participants were from public universities, whilst the remaining four participants were from private universities. All participants had postgraduate degrees with six having additional doctoral degrees. Four of the participants had attained tenure positions whilst the remaining six were yet to attain tenured ranks.

4.2 Study Themes

Upon analysis, several consistent aspects of the participants' descriptions of their experiences in the workplace emerged. First, each woman described key mechanisms in their contexts that enabled their sense of accomplishment as professionals in ensuring career success and progression in the workplace. The themes that emerged from the interviews with the participants of the study are presented and discussed below.

4.2.1 Women's Personal Traits and Characteristics in the Workplace

The participants' reflections on their personal experiences as female administrators indicated that they shared some common personal attributes that helped them achieve their work goals. The most commonly shared characteristic is that all of the participants said they were able to cope with the demands of their domestic and professional spheres, and complete multiple tasks at the same time. They explained that generally, women in Ghana, especially career women, have to accomplish many personal, family, and work-related duties simultaneously. Consequently, the ability to manage multiple tasks is one of the most refined attributes a career woman needs to possess in order to be successful.

The participants believed that one of the strengths of female administrators is being able to complete different tasks in a given period of time, and this aptitude makes these women more controlled and methodical. According to one participant, she was an organised person; and therefore, she could handle deadlines and other pressures very well. For another, the having the ability to manage different tasks in a certain period of time had sharpened her time management skills. She believed that "*Women were essentially competent managers since they had to run their household every day. They undertake domestic chores such as cleaning, cooking, taking care of the children and do others. Hence, they had better management skills as compared to men*" (Dean or head of a faculty, personal interview, January, 2017). She was of the view that her personal experiences, often in the face of unpredictable and unforeseen circumstances, had honed her ability to manage her time better.

Generally, the participants recounted their achievement in the workplace to open-mindedness. Based on the interviews, being open-minded referred to these women's capacity to avoid taking hasty decisions, demonstrate self-control and remain calm. A participant revealed that she was often inundated with diverse staff issues she had to deal with. Anytime any of her staff had issues, she tried to resolve them by remaining calm. She said that "*in managing sensitive issues such as appointments or promotions and exercising authority, one could not be insensitive but one cannot also come across as too lenient*". (Deputy Registrar, personal interview, January, 2017). She said it was difficult to maintain self-control whilst she was under a lot of pressure, but gradually she has learned to maintain the required balance in doing so.

Another participant said that being composed was an advantage, especially in presenting divergent views in the course of performing work duties. She mentioned when situations were explosive, she tried to remain composed and calm tempers down by offering a listening ear and not being judgemental of others. She mentioned that, being tactical and well composed was key dealing with her superior faculty members. "*In exercising authority, I could be very strict, but I try to remain calm*" (Head of Department, personal interview, January, 2017). She believed that being gentle and well composed were critical for survival as woman in her faculty.

All the participants said that unconstructive gender stereotypes still remain pervasive in their institutions. These were issues that are usually raised implicitly and explicitly during our interactions. According to the participants, women were still perceived as being careful and thorough in their interactions. However, the participants agreed that they could relate with some of the characteristics they often tagged with, but they said they did not feel discouraged because of those descriptions but rather use them to their advantage.

A participant admitted that she was thorough and very particular, but related that because of these virtues, her dean and the other colleagues trusted her to attend to administrative issues that entailed high attention to detail; *“prior to my current appointment, I was appointed twice in succession as departmental examinations officer and chair to the timetable committee because of these attributes”* (Head of Department, personal interview, January, 2017).

According to the participants, another common personal trait believed to be shared by most women is their passion to be of service to other people. A participant said, *“as a woman and a mother, I am called to serve. I serve students, superior members of faculty, other staff and colleagues alike. I am used to serving other people. I do not feel that being of service to other people is undignified, rather I derive satisfaction in doing so.”*(Senior Assistant Registrar, personal interview, January, 2017). She explained that being an administrator is basically about serving other people. She mentioned that female administrators who recognise that their primary duty is to serve their colleagues and students are more willing to listen to their needs, suggestions, and feedback, and more willing to try fulfilling those wishes. She was of the view that *“I find no difference in my role as a mother from my role as an administrator. Basically, the roles are the same, one always has people to take care of, provide service and support to. We need to multi-task to remain effective in both roles.”* (Senior Assistant Registrar, personal interview, January, 2017).

Another participant said that *“I feel honoured to have an opportunity to serve others and i make sure I do that with all conviction”* (Vice Dean, personal interview, January, 2017). She explained that being able to recognise that her primary duty was to be of service to others influences her resolve to discharge her responsibilities adequately.

All the participants believed that these personal characteristics and traits were essential to female administrators in performing their duties and helped them achieve their goals.

4.2.2 Support and Encouragement from Colleagues and Staff in the Workplace

Participants agreed that support and encouragement from colleagues and staff in the workplace was an important determinant in their ability to deal with their day-to-day administrative responsibilities. As administrators, the women in this study often worked longer hours than other colleagues. Moreover, they sometimes worked on weekends for certain events and commitments. All the participants were appreciative of the support from their colleagues and staff.

One participant narrated how support from colleagues initiated her career advancement. She revealed that in her university, faculty heads were selected through an election, and she applied to be elected as dean of faculty on two occasions. The first time she ran for the election, she lost the position to male colleague. Subsequently, her colleagues encouraged and supported her to run for the position again after four years. According to her, *“I felt that my first experience was enough; I was afraid of losing again but encouragement from colleagues gave me the strength to overcome my fear of failure. I ran for a second time and won convincingly”* (Dean, personal interview, January, 2017). She further explained that, the humiliation of losing an election was not her only concern. She needed to commit valuable time and resources to campaign again if she wanted to win but she was afraid of losing the second time. But, her colleagues encouraged her to attempt a second run. They provided support and assistance during the election process. Another participant also revealed that she was grateful to have a very dependable and reliable Administrative Assistant. She disclosed that that particular administrative assistant had been working for a long time in the department, so was very familiar with the work environment. The assistant seemed to understand what she needed even if she gave no instructions. She described the importance of institutional memory and competent support staff as follows: *“I feel lucky to have an administrative assistant who is very competent of executing most administrative tasks for me. Her knowledge of the nature of work in the department made her an asset to the functioning of the department. When I am in need of anything, she is always available and able to assist. She knows what is expected of her and she doesn't fail to deliver on expectations. I feel too blessed to have her around; sometimes I find it difficult to work without her.”*

(Head of Department, personal interview, January, 2017). To this participant, having a very competent administrative assistant is essential to her effectiveness on the job. She believed that the support and assistance from this administrative assistance was crucial to success of her work in the department.

All the participants believed that support and encouragement from colleagues and staff in the workplace was an essential determinant in their ability to deal with their day-to-day administrative responsibilities.

4.2.3 Institutional Policies and how they reproduce Unequal Outcomes

All the participants believed that the low number of high rank female administrators in their institution was, in part, due to institutional policies regarding promotion that were systematically more favourable for men. One commonly reported policy was that male tenured professors in advantaged positions subsequently determine who is eligible for promotion. In order to become a dean, a faculty member has to at least hold a doctorate degree. In addition, candidates must have attained a certain rank and must have served in one or more managerial positions such as head of department. Similarly, in the administrative professional hierarchy, a candidate needs to have served in certain capacities to be found eligible to serve in higher ranked positions.

The participants expressed concern that more male faculty members continuously serve in the strategic boards and committees compared to female faculty members. In Ghanaian universities, board and committee members have power over promotion decisions, it just happens that there are more men in top positions so it is the men who have the dominant voice when such boards and committees decide who deserves promotion.

One participant affirmed that written policies on promotion merely determine the educational level and administrative experience of an administrator. In practice, however, more male faculty members are eligible for administrative jobs because they consistently hold advantaged positions. A participant mentioned that Ghanaian universities have historically been male dominated. The number of male tenured professors still remains higher than that of their female counterparts: *“Though policies are there to ensure equality between men and women in the workplace, these policies are implemented based on committee or board recommendations. However, the fact remains that men are dominant on boards and committees that decides who deserves promotion. Usually when promotion decisions are taken, they go to the advantage of men”*. (Head of Department, personal interview, January, 2017)

Another participant expressed similar concerns. She also explained that fewer women are eligible for top positions. She explained that most universities require candidates for administrative positions to obtain doctorate degrees and tenure, this requirement, puts women at a disadvantaged position because not many women can obtain doctoral degrees or tenure as easily as men. She said *“unlike men, it is more demanding for women to pursue doctorate degrees and obtain tenure because women have to cope with family and work responsibilities. As such, they are unable to focus on their teaching, research, and publications which are key requirements to obtain tenure and promotion”* (Head of Department, personal interview, January, 2017). Consequently, male faculty members find it easier to meet the criteria for eligibility for promotion earlier than female faculty members. She argued that women are more likely to be distracted by family matters in their pursuit of doctorate degrees. This situation reduces their chances for eligibility when pursuing an administrative position.

Despite the participants' concern over the low representation of women administrators in their universities; some of them were not in favour of a policy whose sole purpose is to increase the number of women in a position. One head of department, for example, said she did not like the fact that some policies are designed to increase women's participation in leadership positions, but they do not take women's leadership qualities into consideration. She thought that policies should not only be designed to increase women's participation, but also to ensure that those who are in high rank administrative positions have the qualities to function as such. She argued that having a qualified administrator is more important than increasing the number of women in administrative positions. Similarly, another participant believed that improving women's position should begin with the change of perception of women's roles in the workplace. She was of the view that *“it is important to change the stereotypical perception that people hold on the roles of men and women in the workplace. People need to acknowledge women's ability to function as professionals but not judge them on perceived gender capabilities.”* (Deputy Registrar, personal interview, January, 2017). The results from the interviews showed that women relied on the support and assistance from individuals in the workplace to function effectively as administrators. They also viewed being a woman as advantageous because their acquired attributes and inherent personal traits sometimes came in handy in performing assigned duties and responsibilities at work.

The participants acknowledged that some unconstructive stereotypes of women were common in their workplace. However, they adopted strategies to overcome them and use them to their individual advantage.

4.3 Discussion of Results

Literature on women's career advancement has described numerous impediments and challenges that women have had to overcome to achieve success, such as meeting the demands of work responsibilities, discriminatory institutional policies related to promotion, and negative stereotypes of women (Eagly, 2007; Lee, 2001; Madsen, 2008; Turner, 2007). Many of the challenges that women administrators in this study experienced resonate with previous literature worldwide; these challenges include the difficulty of balancing women's prescribed roles and their professional demands, policies that reproduce unequal outcomes.

Prior studies on the challenges of women's career advancement in universities presented similar findings. They showed that playing multiple roles continues to be one of the major obstacles for women who want to advance their careers (Lee, 2001; Eagly, 2007; Madsen, 2008). In Madsen's study of women in Singaporean higher education (2008), some of her participants reported that they had support from other people and that this support helped them focus on their work responsibilities.

Findings from this study align with what previous literature has suggested. These women administrators received tremendous and vital support from colleagues and other staff at work. They reported that colleagues were very considerate of their extenuating circumstances. When describing their experiences, these women, however, did not seem to be aware of some of the implications of their colleagues' gestures.

In this regard, these women's appreciation of their colleagues' gestures of goodwill implies a quandary. On one hand, they wanted to show that they were as strong, independent, and capable as any man in fulfilling the necessary duties in the workplace. On the other hand, the acceptance of special treatment also implies they accepted that women are weak and delicate, and consequently do not have the necessary qualities or character to fulfill some of their administrative duties. The generous and courteous gestures from their colleagues might in fact be sincere acts of kindness, but they also underscore the notion that women are weak and incapable of fulfilling their professional duties. Consequently, instead of helping them negate the notion of women as weaker creatures, their willingness to accept these compensating gestures can limit their effort to defy the socially constructed roles that contribute to gender inequality, which might ultimately interfere with their professional development and advancement in the workplace.

In accomplishing their tasks at work, these women often depended on the staff members who had proven to be the most reliable. During the interviews, some of the participants stated that they could accomplish a lot of tasks when they had reliable staff. With this type of support in their professional spheres, these women said they could organise and manage their time more efficiently and work more effectively. A closer examination of the interaction between the support system and the women administrators' success implies that in order to successfully navigate their convoluted paths to top positions, women administrators need to have a strong support system from the individuals closest to them. Murniati (2012) state that support and encouragement from colleagues and other staff members is critical to the understanding of women's path to success in the workplace.

With regards to the role of promotion policies on women's career advancement, previous studies have indicated that higher education institutions lacked policies or strategies to ensure women's preparation and equal access to top administrative positions (Murniati, 2012; Madsen, 2008). In relation to policies pertaining to promotion, the situation in Ghanaian higher education echoes what Murniati (2012) described in her study. Ghana does not have a special policy directed to improve gender equity either. Government regulations concerning promotion, hiring, and salary are the same for men and women. For instance, the salary schedule and the requirements for academic and leadership promotions are the same for male and female. Despite this equal treatment, only few women manage to achieve top leadership positions (Ampofo, 2004; Adu-Oppong; Aikins & Darko, 2017). This suggests that even though policies specify equal treatment, they do not guarantee equity. Participants of this study agreed that women were still underrepresented in administrative positions. They expressed the opinion that the low number of women administrators was partly the result of institutional policies regarding promotion that systematically favour men. They explained that even though institutional policies were not written to prevent women from advancing their careers, the policies related to promotion resulted in the lack of leadership aspirations among women. They argued that this lack of aspiration stemmed from the challenges women face in balancing their roles. The written policy applies similarly to men and women.

However, because women have to perform their domestic and professional roles simultaneously, it takes them longer to be eligible for full professorship or the corresponding analogous ranks, and thus for top leadership positions. These women explained that even with help, family and domestic responsibilities can distract them or postpone their promotion. Women consequently need more time to publish their research and to prepare their teaching materials, and they may not be able to provide community service as often as their male counterparts. Because of such circumstances, women do not achieve tenured positions as quickly as their male colleagues, if at all. Women who are fully tenured and hold leadership positions are generally women who have grown children, women of high socio-economic status, women with husbands in positions of power, and women who managed to completely defy gender discrimination.

When asked whether they would like to change such policies to increase the number of women in the applicant pool, the participants stated that they would rather rely on their personal initiative and perseverance. Instead of changing and improving the current policies of promotion to increase the number of women eligible to become leaders, these women administrators wanted women to achieve their positions through personal initiative and hard work, and agreed it was very important to feel positive and empowered as a result. They would rather prove they were capable of becoming an effective leader in the traditional system. Though they recognised that their gendered roles were a limitation in the public sphere, they were nevertheless of the opinion that in order to become a leader, a woman had to work harder and should be prepared to take on the challenges of balancing both professional and domestic duties.

The experiences of these women suggest that they had contradictory opinions about gender equality in their institutions. First, they stated that policies regarding promotion systematically favour men. Many women were not eligible for top positions because the requirements were more challenging for women than men to fulfill. Not many women were able to achieve full professor status, because they had to juggle their home and work responsibilities. As a result, not many women were eligible for high administrative positions. However, when asked whether they would like to change the policies, they stated that they did not wish to challenge what was already in place. They furthermore indicated that women indeed had to work harder to become leaders. These reflections seem contradictory at first, but they underlined the strategies these women used to break the elusiveness of gender discrimination. Eagly (2007) contended that women had to surmount numerous barriers to succeed. Some of these barriers are not rigid and are thus difficult to detect, but some are obvious, such as women's domestic responsibilities. She furthermore argued that many women had the skills and ability to discover the subtle impediments along the way and learned to find the ways to success. Women are likely to succeed if they adapt to their existing environment. In other words, women have to play by men's rules. Eagly further stated that women "should not wait to seek leadership until organisational and cultural changes have created a level playing field" (p. 181). Eagly's advice in her book perfectly captures the strategies the participants of this study used in navigating their career paths. They agreed that the policies related to promotion were not written to discriminate against women, but in reality, they nevertheless put women in disadvantaged positions.

Changing the existing policies might not be an easy task because the majority of the decision makers were male and it might take a long time to accomplish. Relying on their strengths seems to reflect their conscious choice to opt for indirect strategies of dealing with policies in a male-dominated environment. In these participants' views, women should seek ways in which to attain their professional goals by relying on the available resources, their own strengths, and not waiting for other people, mostly men, to create more accommodating institutional policies.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine how women perceive workplace processes as inhibiting factors to women's advancement into top ranking administrative positions in Higher Education (HE) management. In particular, this study was interested in exploring women's challenges and the strategies they utilise to achieve their positions. The study suggests that in general, it took longer for women to fulfill the requirements necessary to be eligible for promotion because they had to play multiple roles. Based on the participants' reflections about how they perceived their gender roles, a woman's journey to leadership position is still long and winding, and women accept this as their reality in the Ghanaian workplace.

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