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Beyond the glass ceiling: an exploration of the experiences of female corporate organizational leaders in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Although an increase in the inclusion of women in the global labor market has been reported in recent times, existing literature show that women are still heavily underrepresented in organizational leadership positions. Many studies in this area mainly focused on perceived barriers to women's ascend to leadership positions, while little attention is paid to insights into the lived experiences of women who have already managed to assume leadership positions. This study was conducted to plug this gap in the literature. We interviewed 10 women corporate organizational leaders in Ghana to share their lived experiences as female leaders within the Ghanaian context. Our findings reveal that women still face several challenges even after breaking the glass ceiling to attain leadership positions in corporate organizations in Ghana. The main challenges were raised around the issue of gender, discrimination, age, their roles as mothers and wives. On the other hand, their positions also came with benefits and opportunities such as improved financial status, a command for respect as well as increasing their social and business networking capacity. More importantly, age although a disadvantage for the young women leaders, it was seen as a resource for older women as it enhances their respect and seen as performance of motherhood roles in this Ghanaian context. The study concludes that although women leaders' experiences are largely negative, older women leaders seemed to utilize their positions actively and creatively and perform pseudo-motherhood roles which in turn helps them in the performance of their leadership roles.

KEYWORDS

Women leaders; leadership; corporate leadership; underrepresentation; discrimination; prejudice; Ghana; Sub Saharan Africa

Introduction

Despite recent reports (Catalyst, 2018; Brosnan, 2017) of advancements of women in the global labor market, existing literature shows that women's representation is not evenly distributed across all spaces in this market. That is, while women are increasingly finding routes and gaining acceptance into various occupational activities and organizations, certain spaces within occupations and organizations remain difficult and somewhat closed for women to access. Among such occupational and organizational spaces are leadership positions. According to Brosnan (2017), although the number of women in leadership positions in corporate organizations in the world increased from 19% in 2004 to 25% in 2017, in the same period, the number of corporate organizations without women in senior leadership positions also increased slightly from 33% to 34%. In 2018, data produced by The

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Catalyst, a nonprofit organization which focuses on building safe and inclusive workplaces for women, indicated that women constituted only 5.2% in leadership positions of S & P 500 companies in the United States of America and 37.1% in Canada. In India and Japan, the figures were 16 and 7% respectively (Catalyst, 2018). In Europe, it was reported that women constitute only about 1.8% of CEOs and 10% of board members of Financial Times' 500 Companies (Catalyst, 2018). While data from Africa concerning this issue is hard to come by, evidence in the existing literature regarding gender relations and the position of women on the continent suggests that the situation for African women may be similar if not worse (see Titi Amayah & Haque, 2017) in comparison to other regions as highlighted above. Thus, while the progress of women in corporate organizations in recent times is undeniable, their underrepresentation, especially in leadership positions is factual and worrying, thus a subject of continual vicious debated in various circles in the global labor market and community (Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Ryan et al., 2016).

The reasons for women's underrepresentation in corporate leadership positions, and by extension, societal leadership roles are wide and varied and have received considerable research attention over decades (see Eagly & Karau, 2002; Oakley, 2000). Such research have produced a wide variety of theories ranging from global patriarchal systems that place power in the male gender (Carli & Eagly, 2001) to gender role ideologies, beliefs and socialization of specific cultures and contexts that view leadership and responsibility as masculine activities thereby depriving the female gender of any leadership roles (Ely et al., 2011; Oplatka, 2006). For instance, the role congruity theory of prejudice toward women leaders postulates that the perceived incongruity between the female gender role and leadership roles lead to two forms of prejudice: (a) perceiving women less favorably than men as potential occupants of leadership roles and (b) evaluation behavior that fulfills the prescriptions of a leadership role are less favorable when it is enacted by a woman (Eagly & Karau, 2002, p. 576). The consequence of these perceptions is that attitudes are less favorable toward female than male leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

In Ghana, researchers have identified factors such as patriarchy, biased gender norms, negative gender power relations against women, discouragement from females toward female achievers, historic under-training and under education of women among other factors as contributors to women's underrepresentation in corporate leadership (Akuamoah-Boateng et al., 2003; Gyekye, 2013). Some studies also suggest that women's reproductive roles in Ghanaian society prevents them from obtaining the level of training and education that would enable them access leadership positions in institutions and organizations (see Boateng, 2018). Despite these reported many bottlenecks in women's paths to organizational leadership positions, some women have however managed to attain such positions. While it is interesting to know how such women manage to scale the barriers and break the perceived glass ceiling¹ to access leadership, it is equally interesting and practically valuable to gain some insight into the experiences of such women as they perform their leadership duties. However, in the context of Ghana, insights into the lived experiences of women who manage to assume leadership positions in corporate organizations are hard to find in the existing literature. Using a qualitative phenomenological research approach, we conducted this study to explore women's experiences of corporate organizational leadership in Ghana to plug this gap. The main aim of this article therefore is

to obtain an in-depth insight into the work-related experiences of women who perform leadership roles in Ghanaian organizations paying particular attention to the challenges they face and possible opportunities available while performing these roles.

Methods

Approach and design

We adopted a qualitative research approach with phenomenological design to conduct this study. This approach and design enable the interpretation of a phenomenon in its natural settings and an exploration of the meanings people within these settings attach to it. In this sense, using this approach and design enabled us to develop in-depth insight into the individual meanings and shared interpretations as well as the importance that female organizational leaders ascribe to their lived experiences as leaders of organizations.

Informants

We used purposive sampling in the recruitment of our study informants. A total of ten female corporate leaders participated in this study. All the ten informants occupy senior leadership positions in private corporate organizations in Ghana. Among the ten female leaders, two were leaders in the banking sector, one worked in the food processing industry, one was in the advertising industry, two were in the auditing industry, one was in the oil and gas industry, while another one was in the sanitation industry and the remaining two were in the insurance industry. The job titles of these female leaders included Senior Partner, Country Manager, Executive Director, Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer. Their leadership experiences ranged from 3–18 years and their ages ranged from 32–55 years old. Eight out of the ten informants had master's degrees, and one had a PhD and the other a bachelor's degree. Seven of the informants were married, two were divorced, and one was not married. Out of the seven married informants, three had three children, the other three had two children each, and one had no child. Of the two who have divorced, one had two children, and the other has no child. The one who was not married has no child.

Data collection processes

Data for this study was collected through a combination of in-depth individual interviews, observations, and informal conversations. The individual interviews were the main data collection method for this study and supplemented by observations and informal conversations. Observations and informal conversations were conducted during the interview visits that took place in the organizational premises of the leaders. The observations and conversation mainly took place when the leading author was waiting to conduct interviews with informants. The triangulation of the data collection methods provided depth, corroboration as well as thick descriptions of the informants' leadership experiences. The in-depth interviews were all conducted in English and scheduled at times and places convenient to the informants. An interview guide was used with questions addressing issues around informants' experiences as leaders, the opportunities and possible challenges they face in these

leadership positions. All informants were interviewed once but, in few instances, where follow-up questions and clarifications were needed, we contacted the informants again to arrange for this. Each interview lasted an average of 70 minutes, and each interview were audio-recorded, after consent was sought and granted.

Data analysis

The analysis of data started by transcribing all audio-recorded data into word documents. The transcription process was done by the first author who had the linguistic competence of the local languages, this was important because although all interviews were conducted in English, during interviews, however, in few instances some local language was used especially on hard to translate terms or jargon. All authors are well trained and experts in qualitative methods. Observations and informal conversations data were also added to form the complete data set for the study. We then adopted the five-step meaning condensation approach (Gorgi, 1975) to further synthesize the data. In step one, each collaborating author thoroughly read the texts and familiarized themselves with the data after which all authors met to discuss and settle on the final condensed statements that shed light on the research questions. In step two, each author independently uploaded the data in NVIVO 12 software to manage the data and pick out meaning units. These meaning units were the constellation of words or statements that relate to the same central meaning. This was followed by step three which involved an independent coding process where each author picked out codes from the meaning units. The codes were key words or phrases from the meaning units which spoke directly to the issue of leadership experience. In step four, closely related codes were grouped together under overarching themes that captured the essence of information being provided. In the final step, all authors met to discuss the themes generated and themes that were unanimously agreed on were selected as themes that emerged in the study. Our data analyses approach helped ensure systematization in the data analysis process as well as rigor and inter-coder reliability.

Reflexivity

The lead author in this study who was the sole data collector was a man studying women's experiences. It was therefore important for him to reflect on each step of the data collection process and in his interaction with the informants to ensure that the outcomes of the research reflect only what the participants shared. The lead author made sure to allow the informants to share their experiences and by avoiding any leading questions or mixing his own biases with the information provided. By involving multiple authors especially in the data handling process, credibility was increased as codes and themes were discussed and unanimously settled on. This made it difficult for any single author's biases to influence the reported findings.

Ethics

Ethical clearance for this investigation was obtained from the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD) in Norway where the corresponding author was a Masters' student during the conduct of the study. Approval from the research setting were also obtained

from the authorities of the organizations where the informants worked. Participation was purely voluntary, and all informants signed written informed consent forms after receiving information of the nature and purpose of the study. Informants were assured of the highest possible levels of confidentiality and anonymity. All recorded audios were kept in password-protected file on the personal computer of the corresponding author and only the lead author had access to the raw data. Collaborating authors only had access to anonymized versions of the data. All names used in this study are pseudonyms in order to ensure the anonymity of the study informants.

Findings

Interesting themes emerged from the data analysis which captured the depth and breadth of challenges, opportunities, interactions, and perceptions that make up the complexities of women's experiences in corporate leadership positions. The following are the themes that emerged: age was seen as an advantage and disadvantage, there were some difficulties in dealing with long serving members, general perceptions of women at workplace emerged, including discrimination, sexism, prejudices among others. Additionally, the issue of loneliness of women leaders at work and with work issues also emerged, women as mothers and wives also emerged as an important experience shaping women leaders, it also emerged that being in leadership positions also came with benefits such as networking, respect as well as an improved financial position.

Age as advantage or disadvantage

The information shared by the informants revealed differences in experiences between younger, those below 40 years and the older women leaders, those above 40 years. According to the young women leaders, some staff members who were older than them thought that they were too young to lead. According to these informants such behavior caused several difficulties in dealing with such people. Linda shared her experiences regarding this phenomenon:

As you are aware in our society older people are considered as leaders in the house, in the community and in social groups. This phenomenon has been transferred to the corporate environment and it is making it difficult for some of us. Nevertheless, the corporate environment is not only about age or gender, but also more of qualification and competence. I am here as a leader based on my competence and not my age. They did not understand why a young lady like me is their boss. In fact, I nearly quit because of the provocation when I started. I felt that I do not belong here. If I talk, there is a problem, and if I decided not to talk too, there is a problem. It was a whole lot, but by God's grace, I have managed to stay put and I must say things have improved.

Vera, the youngest informant, and the general manager of one of the organizations had similar experience like Linda with regard to her age. She echoed:

I have two managers working under me. All of them are older than me, and because of that when they go wrong, and I try to correct them it becomes a problem. They always respond and make comments to undermine my authority. And as you know this is an African setting, whenever there is an issue of any sort between a younger person and someone older, the

younger one is mostly accused of wrongdoing. I was once asked to apologize to some colleagues who are older than me because they did not like how I spoke with them. My 'only crime' was that I ordered them to execute a particular task, but they felt I was too harsh on them.

Contrary to the difficulties the younger informants experience, the older informants viewed age as a resource to command respect and authority. Some of them indicated that their age made it easy for them to easily influence their subordinates as well as gaining the respect from their superiors. Abena narrated that:

All the workers here call me mom because of my age. So, if I need help, I just ask, can you support your mother to do this or that? Sometimes this makes things easy for me. They always see me more like a mother than a manager. Of course, sometimes I am very strict, but I think they take it lightly and in good faith because of my age. Some of them can be my children so I deal with them as children.

Liose also sees her age as an essential resource when dealing with the board members of her company. She claimed that the directors mostly deal with her differently. She recounted:

I have never felt undermined or disrespected at the board meetings. Even when I did not meet the expected targets, the way they talk to me is different from the other leaders. If you manage yourself well, your age can be a shield for you in the midst of male colleagues.

From the observation at the office premises of some informants, it became clear that there is some sought of mother-child relationship where absolute respect giving to the mother was in display. The conversation between some of these informants and their bosses seemed cordial. For instance, I observe workers welcoming their boss as "*mommy you are welcome,*" "*mommy how are the kids*" and so forth.

Linked to the issue of age, female leaders also highlighted their experiences with long serving members of their organizations.

Difficulty in dealing with long serving staff members

Some informants expressed the challenge they faced in working with staff members who have been in the organization for a long period. It emerged that some informants were faced with resistance in the initial stages of their leadership career. Percy who was recruited to lead three merged companies shared her experience regarding working with long-serving staff members:

I joined this company at a time when they were restructuring. They had brought three subsidiary companies together, so the general managers of all the three companies became managers, and they were all reporting to me as a general manager. This caused a lot of dissatisfaction and resistance. Any initiative I proposed was met with some serious resistance. I mean they were not ready to comply with the changes I wanted to bring, and it took us more than six months to get going. They would always remind me that I am a woman, and I do not know this and that because I am new. Of course, I know that I am a woman so giving me a reminder would not make me weak. I know what I am doing, and I think that is what is important.

To the contrary, Getty believed that she did not face much resistance when she attained the leadership position probably because she was part of the company and among first group of staff the company hired. She narrated:

I was brought to this place from one of our branches where I was serving as a sales manager. Before that, I had served in many other positions here at the headquarters. My records were there for everyone to see. This is a company I have worked with for more than two decades now. I will say the staff members have been very cooperative when I took over as a leader maybe because we have been together for such a long time.

Nevertheless, some informants who went through the ranks of their organizations to attain their positions also complained about lack of respect and cooperation from some colleagues despite they being together for a long time before the promotion. Lena shared her experience regarding this:

Some of my colleagues felt that I had been part of them, and therefore, there is no difference between us. In fact, I had to employ stricter methods to get them to work on my orders. Although that was not my style, but I felt that things were getting out of hand and that some of them were taking me for granted. I detected that people were very envious of me and even saying unfounded things as to how I accessed the position. They forgot that some of us worked extra to meet our targets when we started working here. A lot had been said about me, but I encouraged myself and I made sure that my 'work output' will talk for me.

Negative perception of women in the workplace- gender stereotypes and prejudices

Negative perceptions about women at workplaces was raised by our informants as something damaging. These perceptions contributed to the discrimination, gender stereotypes and prejudices against women at workplaces and women leaders in particular. Such issues were pronounced as a negative experience that affects the working efficiency of these informants. Some of the informants reported that they were discriminated against during their promotion. Others also reported some reactions they considered to be prejudiced and stereotypes against them. Liose, who had worked with her company for 25 years, shared her experience.

I think it took me a long time to be promoted. Almost all the men that I came here with were promoted before me. I mean at a point some men were not even qualified, but they were all promoted ahead of me. I believed it was due to the perception that women cannot lead in companies like this. It was very worrying, but I could not do anything about it but wait and hope because I was the only senior women at the top of the hierarchy.

To some, stereotypes and prejudices were the significant challenges for them. The prejudice that women are not fit for leadership positions were demonstrated through disrespect and lack of cooperation from subordinates, colleagues and sometimes superiors. Others were in the form of comments which sought to undermine the capabilities of women leaders. Dina shared her experience on this:

When you give a directive to subordinates, you could read from their body language that they are not taking it kindly. They acted in a manner that they would not if it is a man who is given the same instructions. Aside, you also have people who are your colleagues and find it a bit challenging to take directives from you because you are a woman . . . I always have to restrain myself not to react negatively towards them.

Similarly, Vera also recounted how she attempt to settle a dispute between some junior workers and the company which was unsuccessful, but when a male colleague intervened offering an almost similar solution, it was immediately accepted:

One time the workers were agitating about their salaries, and I spoke with them that we will meet and discuss it at the board level in our next meeting. That did not stop them, but when a male colleague came and spoke with them saying the same things, they were ok with it. So, you see the reaction to women. Sometimes I do not know whether it is the person carrying the message or the message itself is a problem.

Some informants also experienced stereotypes and prejudices based on the perceived assumption that the profession they are in including the leadership position is not for women. Linda shared her experience on this:

I have personally suffered from the perception that the work I am doing is not for women. Some of the workers think that the type of work we do here is not for women and I must therefore step aside for a man to take the leadership position of this company. Of course, I am not surprised about this attitude because it seems to be the general perception in this country. Anytime the company encounter challenges this thought comes up, yet I always prove them wrong.

Christian added that there was an uproar when she was appointed as a leader because she is a woman:

I believed that some people are not ready to change from the old adage that women are not fit to lead or only good in some sort of work. When I was appointed, the workers union went on a demonstration that the work is not for women and that I cannot manage it. However, since I took over as the leader, the company has expanded five-fold and now when they see me, they cannot even look in my face. I believe in myself, and I know what I can do . . . [hahaha], she laughed.

Some informants reveal that they continuously experience sexist comments. They obviously feel bad about when such comments are made, but they try to ignore such comments and focus on what is more important, their work. Linda had this to share about this:

Sometimes you hear comments from 'people in suit' (meaning men), and you ask yourself, did he meant what he said. I mean you will go for a meeting, and someone will look at you and make comments like 'is all this dressing for this meeting' 'miss Ghana I like your hairstyle and so on'. I mostly find it confusing as to what dress I should wear to work because there is someone who is there and always want to comment about your dress. I do not like such comments, but if you react negatively, then you will be labelled as not friendly or 'too picky'.

Two of the informants indicated that they had not experienced any form of stereotype or prejudice. They were of the view that the number of women in the leadership position of their respective companies are enough to give them confidence and courage to undertake certain initiatives. Percy, whose company have more women in leadership positions had this to say:

I must admit that I have not felt intimidated in anyway in what I do. I think the colleagues I have worked with have been so helpful and respectful. I think it is because we have several women in the senior management team. At meetings, you always feel comfortable to express yourself without any fear. When you are alone within male-dominated management, there is a likelihood that you would experience prejudices.

Antione supported this view that the number of women in the management level serve as a protective shield against any form of prejudices, she also then "jokingly" pointing out that her physical appearance (6 ft. 5 in) put fear in the people who may want to undermine her.

She stood up in the course of the interview and said: *Look at my height. I am a very tall woman, and I am big; I want to believe that my structure commands much respect . . . hahaha* [she laughed].

The feeling of loneliness

The informants shared varied dimensions of the feeling of loneliness in performing their leadership roles. Some experience loneliness during meetings, others during conversation among colleagues and those who find their way in difficult situations to prove their worthy. Dina shared her experience:

As I said, we have few women in this company, and I am the only woman among the senior partners. I am the only woman who attend senior partners meeting with the men. And I sometimes ask myself, where are the women? But then you have to accept that this is the situation and I hope that things will change going forward. It is sometimes difficult for you to get people to support your input. It is sometimes more like ‘when men are talking women are supposed to listen’. All these experiences have position me well to deal with complex issues.

For some other female leaders, their male colleagues turn to engage in conversations that make them feel isolated. Linda echoed this experience:

Early in the morning you come around and all what they [colleague males] will be discussing is football . . . you will hear Chelsea-Manchester-and so on. Every second they will get is either football or where they will meet after work to drink or do other things known to them. It sometimes makes life boring over here, but you cannot change it. I just stay in my office and concentrate on my work.

For others, the few number of women in their organizational leadership, lack of support and acceptance from some section of the staff force them to work independently to justify themselves:

Sometimes the behavior from the male colleagues will not even make it convenience for you to ask for their support when you are in difficulty . . . It is more like ‘ok you are the boss now do it for us to see’. I try my best not to find myself at the wrong side of these men. It is normal in institutions dominated by men in our part of the world. It is like you either stay and be like them or you leave. I think it would have been easier if we have at least two or three of us [women] here. With that we could share our problems ranging from family to work and find solutions together.

Women role as mothers and wives

Concerning women leader’s role as mothers and wives, differences arose in narration between women leaders who are married, those who have children and those without children. All informants with children claimed that their responsibilities as mothers presented additional difficulties and stress in trying to balance motherhood roles and leadership duties. My observation during the interviews revealed that some women continually manage and monitor the activities of their children during working hours. This observation happened when calls from children to their mothers (my informants) interrupted some of the interviews. After receiving a call from her children at home, Liose made this remark:

This is how it is my brother [referring to me]. You see, that is what I was talking about just now. I do not stop being a mother when I left home for work. My children will not allow me to have my peace of mind to concentrate on my work. I have to call them to find out what they are doing at home to make sure that all is well. Again, I must get back home right after work to prepare dinner for my kids and my husband. I have to know what happened to them at school and help them to do their homework. These are the things I cannot leave in the hands of other people. It is very difficult and stressful but you have to do it so in order not to break your home.

Antione also explained that her children always called her to discuss things; she felt it was irrelevant or that some of the things could wait:

Sometimes when I am here, my children will call me, and you would realize that what they want to discuss is very flimsy. They will not call their father but always me. At times I would be in a meeting, and they will call to ask about either to go to braid their hair or not, and I mean [. . .]. In fact, I sometimes have to come out from meetings to call and check if they have eaten or done their homework, knowing that I will be late to get home. It is always difficult, stressful, and sometimes mental draining.

Lena shared the same sentiment with Liose and Antoine, but she added that her major worry is her inability to have good quality time with her children because of work:

As a mother, you are responsible for the children upbringing. So, if you are not careful and they become indisciplined, you would be held responsible, not their father. But the pressure from work does not give me enough time to be with my children. I could go for three to four days without seeing my children. Sometimes I asked myself, 'is this what I want to continue doing? I always get worried when my children ask me 'mummy where are you going today' 'mummy which time are you coming back' 'ah there she goes again'. These type of questions from my kids worried me a lot. But what can I do, I need to work . . . I sometimes tell them that you know what I manage to buy you these things and also send you out for holidays because of this work.

Linda spoke about her responsibility as a mother and wife, and what it means to do some household chores:

Our culture [Ghanaian culture] is not like the developed countries where today a man will cook and tomorrow a woman will cook. Here in Ghana, it is the sole responsibility of the woman in the house to cook not the man. When we return from work, my husband will not go to the kitchen. I have to go to the kitchen and prepare food for the family, even if I am tired. In the morning I have to wake up early and prepare breakfast for him and the children before we all leave home for work. Not only cooking I have also to wash my husband's dirty clothes, pack his things in the event that he is travelling and many more.

Contrary to the challenges that women leaders with children seem to face, those without children shared different experiences. Christine shared her experience:

I do not have any difficulty from my home because I live alone, no kids, or husband [. . .]. So, when I come here, it is all about work, and when I go home, I just watch the news and go to bed. When I wake up in the morning, I do not think of how the children will go to school or what they will eat after returning from school. I just prepare and then leave for work.

Vera, who is married but not yet given birth added that for now her situation is still manageable but she knows that this could change soon when she has children:

I think my situation is better as compared to some of my friends who have children. When I am here, I do not think of anything apart from work. I do not think whether my kids have finished school, I do not think what the kids are doing at home. But I know it will not last forever but for now I am on the smooth ride.

It appears from the above presentation that women leaders with children have more challenges in trying to balance their dual responsibilities of motherhood and leadership at workplace.

Networking

It emerged from the findings that majority of women leaders in this study get the chance to create networks with other corporate leaders. For many of the informants, they have been able to create a significant network since attaining the position as leaders. Getty shared her experience:

Attending meetings with the big men in the industry has allowed me to know more people. I think it is a good experience given how I started and where I have been able to come and the network I have created. The fact that I lead and the fact that I am still in the business makes me proud of myself. For me, it has been challenging but rewarding. We have a social media platform that we mostly discuss the challenges and the opportunities of our respective companies. As you know, information flow is very key in this type of work, and with all these networks, I feel a bit safer than when I started because I now got people at my back.

In agreement, Dina added that she now has people to support her when things are not moving as expected:

It is all good; now I have been connected to many people whom I could rely on in terms of difficulties. It is not like I always depend on them, but when you hold a position like this, you need to work hand in hand with the most experienced who could advise you and also give you vital information about the market system.

Christine, however, reported a lack of strategic network, which she believed to be attributed to the dominance of men in her organization. She was of the view that she sometime feels isolated:

You know what, the old boy network work still exists in the cooperate space. Sometimes you will go to a meeting, and you see the men are chatting and discussing issues among themselves. After meetings, they move to the bars to have drinks. I mean we even sometimes have to close a meeting early because they want to go and watch football. But as a woman, I am expected to be home right after work to engage in other things, and this makes things a bit difficult because I do not have anyone to rely on in times of difficulties.

Clearly, these women leaders felt that networking is very important in the corporate world. However, it is only when you get the chance to lead or accepted in the inner corporate circles that you could enjoy such benefits. For example, Christine in this instance is yet to benefit from such social and business networks where men are still dominant.

Financial benefit and command of respect

Another opportunity that comes with a top leadership position shared by the informants is that of financial benefits that come with such positions. It was noted that in as much as there are difficulties with regard to combining family and work responsibilities, the financial benefits with this position, serves as a great deal of motivation. The financial benefits also improve these women's positions within both the households and community. Dina had this to say:

[. . .] yeah, it is not all that rosy because after all, you get what you have worked for. Even though it is very stressful but then the salary is better than the peanuts I used to receive. To be honest my income has improved more than four times of what I was receiving. I have reduced the financial stress that my husband used to have. Of course, now he is contributing more to taking care of the children at home because of my long working hours, but he does not think much about meeting all our financial needs since I am now contributing significantly to it.

Getty added that she had gained much respect from friends, family, and the community members because of her position:

I was interviewed by one of the Television stations, and after it was aired, I received several calls from my friends and family members and some respected personnel from my area. Since then, I have been receiving an invitation after invitation. I mean from my church, my community and even organizations and association I do not have any direct link to. Everybody wants me to share my experiences and also mentor and encourage their members to aim high. I think I am enjoying all this recognition because of my position.

Liose added that she had been nominated to many corporate boards and church and community committees as a result of her position:

All though I have not worked for any public organization before, but because of my work ethics and experience, I have been appointed into two public corporate boards. I think this is a success I must be proud of. God has been good to me right from the beginning of my career. Also, I serve on some committees in church and community. I will add that since I came to the limelight [became leader] three children have been named after me . . . hahaha [she laughed]. I am not surprised because the Akans will say 'nipa papa na yeto no ba din'². These are some of the good things that come with you being in leadership as a woman. Now I see myself as a role model, a motivator, and an inspiration for young females.

Christine recounted that her views are now considered significant during decision-making process both within and outside her family:

What I can say is that I have progressed a lot in my life. I am now considered a very important person within my family and the community as a whole. I mean no decision is taken in my family without my input. I am not saying that I have taken the position of my father or brothers, of course not, but since I attained this position, my father considered me as a significant person and therefore always want to seek my opinion on any decision he wants to take.

Given the above extracts, it is clear that attaining a leadership position, the financial benefits and status attached to it has been a good omen for women leaders in this study. They have gained influence and are now part of decision makers in their households, families and communities.

Discussion

In this section we will discuss some of the intriguing findings of the study. Firstly, we discuss the struggles faced by women leaders, paying attention to existing cultural prejudices and stereotypes. Secondly, we discuss the incessant pressure women leaders face in their leadership performance and in proving their worthiness as leaders. Lastly, we discuss how older women in this study actively use the concept of motherhood, a revered concept in the study context, to help in their enactment and performance of their leadership duties. In the discussion we use theory, literature and our own findings to highlight on the three above mentioned important findings from this study.

Women leadership as a struggle: prejudices and stereotypes

The study findings reveal the existence of prejudices and stereotypes against women leaders in the Ghanaian corporate system. This is attributed, in the literature, to the cultural dominance of men in the Ghanaian society as well as the top corporate hierarchy (Amos-Wilson, 1999; Amu, 2005; Apusigah, 2004). Premised on these cultural beliefs, the corporate world which is dominated by males appears to be hostile to women who had successfully challenged the societal perception that women cannot be leaders in general and in the corporate world and be good at it. As claimed by Hoyt (2010), prejudices and stereotypes toward women leaders come in different forms, for example, our informants experienced instances where statements were made that explicitly point to the fact that they are not fit to be in leadership positions or perform leadership roles. In the same vein, some of our informants found out that subordinates were unwilling to take instructions or react aggressively or adversely to normal work instructions. Vera's case is illustrative of this when subordinates who were agitated could not listen to her but then obeyed a male colleague despite that the two had communicated the same message. This shows a prejudiced societal view in Ghana that women are not authority figures and hence not deserving to be leaders. A study by Boateng (2018) on female academicians in Ghana Universities also confirms the pervasive existence of prejudices and stereotypes toward this group of women. This therefore, suggests that it is not only women in the corporate environment that suffer from these stereotypes and prejudices, but all women in different professional domains. Eagly and Karau (2002) predicted that given the perceived incongruence between the female gender roles and the leadership roles, the chances of women to be selected as leaders are very slim and even when they attain such position, there is high possibility of them being negatively evaluated whilst enacting their leadership roles. The underrepresentation of women leaders in the Ghanaian corporate organizations could partly be as a result of and explained by these prejudices and stereotypes.

Indeed, there is existing evidence indicating that it is not only official discrimination that hinders the career of female leaders but the more systematic and structural subtle forms which align and classify leadership roles and activities as masculine and therefore stereotypically male (Greguletz et al., 2019). Relating to this, Davies et al. (2005) argued that, exposure to stereotypes and prejudices, undermine women leaders' aspirations and their performance on subsequent leadership task. Clarke and Braun (2009) argues that there is a gendered ideology of femininity around emotionality and submissiveness that continues to reinforce the idea that women are unfit for high paying positions. Our study findings also reveal that in the Ghanaian

society, these prejudices and stereotypes are still pervasive and therefore present a major challenge to women in general and our informants who have already managed to climb up the corporate ladder (Oduro & Macbeath, 2003). Evidence from literature as well as the findings of this study have shed more light on some of the reasons why there are fewer women in corporate leadership positions in Ghana particular but also worldwide in general.

Women leaders under incessant and excessive pressure to perform

Prejudices and stereotypes on women leadership result in women leaders wanting to prove their leadership more than their male counterparts. The perceived incongruent between female gender roles and leadership roles results in gendered responsibilities in the corporate world, thereby placing excessive pressure on women who attain leadership positions (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). The findings suggest that there is a high-performance expectation for women leaders and this pressure comes because societal prejudices do not see women as good leaders, hence women leaders must achieve more and better results as a way of proving their capabilities and fitness for the leadership positions they occupy. According to Eagly and Karau (2002), this struggle points to what they term the perceived incongruence between gender roles and leadership roles with regards to women leaders. Our study shows that our informants had excessive pressure to perform to get results and even if they did, there were still perceptions that it could have been due to luck or that they may not repeat the same fit again. The result, therefore, is the existence of continuous pressure which resulted to immense unnecessary stress. These high expectations, constant lack of confidence and trust from subordinates and superiors is consistent with the second form of prejudices against women leaders by Eagly and Karau (2002), which posits that the evaluation of leadership is more favorable to men and less favorable to women, even in instances where results are the same or even where the female leader is doing better than a male leader. Forsyth et al. (1997) found that group members favor men over women when selecting and evaluating leaders even when actual leadership behaviors are held constant in a variety of group settings. Lyness and Heilman (2006) in their study evaluating the performance of upper-level managers and the relationship of performance evaluations to promotion found out that women in leadership positions are evaluated more negatively than men managers which support Eagly and Karau's theory. Ibarra et al. (2013) noted that women in a top leadership position are critically examined because of high visibility among male dominated institutions. These findings imply that women who against all the odds access leadership positions could experience more job-related stresses than their male colleagues due to several factors including high expectations as discussed above. Consequently, most women could truncate their leadership career if the burden becomes too much to bear, this too can then have an effect of preventing more women to seek leadership positions.

Motherhood as a leverage: a cultural and contextual phenomenon

Perhaps the most striking finding in our study is on how age and leadership are closely related when it comes to leadership in our study context. Age was seen both as a resource and a stressor. In other words, age was both an advantage and disadvantage with regards to women leadership in our study context. Women leaders, especially those in their 50s,

acknowledge that their ages were an incentive in their enactment and performance of leadership. This could be explained from the perspective of the Ghanaian cultural context where age is closely related to wisdom and therefore leadership (Adusah-Karikari & Ohemeng, 2014; Apusigah, 2004). Traditionally in the Ghanaian customs people invest authority in older people (Adusah-Karikari & Ohemeng, 2014; Allah-Mensah, 2005). For women this concept even extends to motherhood. Ghana like many countries in the sub-Saharan Africa, still heavily subscribed to the concept of ubuntu, and in this regard, when a woman is old enough to be of the age of your mother, you have to identify such a woman as “mother.” In this regard you need to accord that woman the same respect you would have given to your own biological mother. Our older informants are alive to this contextual fact and actively use it to their advantage. Eagly and Karau’s role congruity theory predicts that some conditionalities, even contextual, could moderate the level of prejudiced against women leaders and in this case therefore, women leaders are using the concept of motherhood, to harness and perform their leadership duties with easy compared to young female leaders. The word mother was explicitly used by subordinates of our informants and the leaders themselves embraced it fully aware that acceptance of such a familial relationship make their leadership performance less arduous. Essentially therefore, in this context the older women reduced prejudices and did gain more trust from their subordinates. While it can be argued that this still essentially promotes a view of confining women in the private space, as motherhood is a reproductive role, a role not perceived as productive as their corporate leadership performance, embracing it assisted them to perform their leadership roles better. This, however, is a strategic choice which may not be transformative, but in our study context it did help older women leaders to gain trust and respect of their colleagues as well as subordinates.

While age works to the advantage of older women as they connect it to motherhood, young women in leadership positions do not have this as an option. In our study, the younger informants were aware of this and because of this they argued and yearned for a more transformative change in perceptions, where they wanted to be recognized for their position and leadership roles other than reproductive roles, which should remain in the private spheres of their lives. In this regard, we see a marked difference of two generations of female leaders fighting in two fronts, the younger ones fighting for a transformative change in terms of societal prejudices and stereotypes, while the older ones chose a more strategic route with immediate gains which may not be far reaching. Regardless, all these women are either fighting or embracing realities in their contextual settings.

Young people in the Ghanaian culture need to respect elders, hence when a young female leader in enacting leadership in this context, it could be seen and interpreted as lacking respect to elders. For example, when a young woman cautions an elder of their mother, father or grandparents’ age, it can be easily mistaken as lacking respect. Such contextual realities make it very difficult for our younger informants to perform their leadership roles, especially when a young person is seen exercising authority over people older (Allah-Mensah, 2005; Apusigah, 2004). The study’s results suggest that “younger” women leaders have a herculean task in dealing with the staff members who are older than them. For example, Vera, the youngest among our informants recounted how she was made to apologize to some subordinates who are older than her just because they were offended by the way she had instructed them to execute a task. Our finding here are consistent with the finding of Carbajal (2018), which found that discrimination against women leaders is more tied to their age than to their gender.

A study by Hallinger and Leithwood (1998) in Thailand also reported that, when it comes to leadership, the status norms of seniority in terms of age remain stronger than institutional authority. The study concluded that culture norms make it inappropriate for younger leaders to make critical comments about subordinates who are older than them, a finding well collaborated in our study as well.

While all these studies suggest and agree that the majority of women leaders might experience discrimination, stereotypes, and prejudices, they also suggest that the level and degree of discrimination may differ on many factors including age. The older the female leader is, the more respect they may get and in our study, this is explicitly connected to the motherhood concept. This also perhaps explain why the younger leaders are fighting for a more transformative agenda including changing societal perceptions while the older female leaders embrace the strategic choices and which explains their embracing of the motherhood concept in their enactment and performance of leadership.

Limitation

The paucity of statistics on women in leadership positions in private corporate organizations was a hindrance to the study. Ghana, like many other developing countries lack adequate data on employment, and unemployment, as well as gender differences on leadership. Due to this, we were not able to acquire the much-needed secondary data in the context of Ghana to adequately support the study especially in the background section. However, this did not affect the study as we supported the study findings with literature from other similar contexts. Again, due to time and resource constraint, only private corporate women leaders were considered for this study. Adding women leaders from the public corporate organizations would have given a broader perspective to the study, however, this also helped the study to remain focused. Finally, as indicated, the study involved few informants and therefore generalization of the findings may be challenging. However, the context is well explained, and it is the readers' responsibility to decide whether these findings apply to their particular contexts.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of women at the top leadership positions of private corporate organizations in Ghana. By exploring individual lived experiences through these women leaders, shared experiences emerged. The findings indicated women in leadership positions in Ghana are still navigating a challenging and an unforgiving terrain both socially and culturally. Gender stereotypes and prejudices are still prevalent and present challenges to these leaders in their performance and enactment of leadership. These prejudices and stereotypes exert more pressure on women leaders to constantly aim for better and at times unrealistic results, which only reproduces the vicious cycle. The study shows that women leaders in the process have to deal with high expectations and negative evaluations from both colleagues and subordinates. However, despite these obvious challenges, the study also reveals that women leaders in this context are not only victims, but they also use their agency actively to navigate this socio-cultural milieu. Older women in the study chose a more strategic approach where they embrace their age and connect it to the locally revered motherhood concept to gain trust and confidence from their colleagues and subordinates. Younger women on the other hand advocated for a more

transformative agenda where they wanted the social and cultural context to change and just be viewed according to their knowledge, qualification and contribution and not just by their age and gender. The study reveals that in this fight for recognition, women may choose different means but aiming for one end. In summary therefore, the study concludes that challenge still exist even after women leaders have broken the glass ceiling. This calls for governments, public and private corporates to continually come up with more radical and transformative policies and programmes that target inclusiveness and encourage women to take up leading roles so as to break the male hegemony in corporate organizations. Additionally bottom-up approaches are called for, targeting the curriculum and encouraging the girl child to participate more in academic subjects and areas of leadership early on in life, and here schools play a vital role.

Notes

1. Glass ceiling.
2. Children are named after good people.

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