

**GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN THE WORKPLACE: A STUDY OF WOMEN'S  
PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION MANAGEMENT IN GHANA**

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**ABSTRACT**

This research paper explores the issue of gender discrimination in the work place; specifically 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. 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 upon interviews with ten women administrative professionals in five public universities in Ghana, are used to assess gender discrimination and the way it has affected the individuals and their careers. The findings from the study revealed that women are indeed underrepresented in the management of Higher Education institutions in Ghana. There are several factors at the institutional levels preventing qualified women from ascending to senior positions in higher education. The study argues that for women to participate in Higher education management effectively some of these barriers must be removed, and suggests ways helpful to enhance women's participation.

**Introduction**

All over the world, gender differences in the labour market have been persistent over time, all the major labour market indicators clearly points 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 institution 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.

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).

### **Problem Statement**

In Ghana, women constitute slightly over 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. A study by Darko (2008) to investigate 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, 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.

### **Purpose of the Study**

In seeking to explain the underrepresentation of women in higher education management, this study, therefore, 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.

### **Literature Review: Gender Discrimination**

Laufer (2002) says that no law has ever attempted to define precisely the term 'discrimination', in the context of employment, it can be defined as the giving of an unfair advantage (or disadvantage) to the members of the particular group in comparison to the members of other group. The disadvantage usually results in the denial or restriction of employment opportunities, or in an discrimination in the terms of benefits of employment. Discrimination is a subtle and complex phenomenon that may assume two broad forms:

1. Unequal (Disparate) Treatment: This is an intentional discrimination treatment. For example, it would include hiring or promoting one person over an equally qualified person because of the individual's race, sex etc; or paying a male more than a female to perform the same job.
2. Adverse Impact: Reskin (2008) write that it is a consequence of an employment practice (application of identical standards for every one) that results in a greater rejection rate for

a minority group than it does for the majority group in the occupation. This concept results from a seemingly neutral, even unintentional employment practice consequence.

Research has shown that the ways that men and women are treated differently in the workplace can be nearly imperceptible at the level of the individual and emerge only when aggregated across individuals (Heilman & Welle, 2005). Crosby (2004), for example, demonstrated that by and large, women do not acknowledge the ways that gender discrimination may have affected their own career experiences. They are more likely to assume personal responsibility for receiving fewer organisational resources than their male coworkers. These same women, however, believe that gender discrimination exists in the workplace and affects the resources that other women receive. It has been argued that gender discrimination is difficult to perceive because it accounts for a small portion of variance in organisational decision-making (Barret & Morris, 2003).

Gender stereotypes lie at the heart of many of our perceptions of the workplace and the people that operate within it (Heilman & Welle, 2005). Descriptive and prescriptive stereotyping exerts significant impact on men's and women's organisational experiences. The impact of stereotyping processes links up onto two types of discrimination, formal and informal (Stangor, 2001). Formal discrimination refers to the biased allocation of organisational resources such as promotions, pay, and job responsibilities, while informal discrimination centers on the interactions that occur between employees and the quality of relationships that they form (Mannix & Dovidio, 2002).

### ***Formal Discrimination***

Descriptive stereotyping shapes the perceptions and expectations people form about men and women in the workplace and provides the fuel for formal discrimination to occur (Heilman, 2001). Adopting a stereotype-consistent view of women job applicants leads evaluators to conclude that they are less likely to have the skills necessary to succeed at male gender-typed jobs. Thus, research has demonstrated that even when the actual qualifications of men and women are equivalent, men are viewed as having higher performance ability, are expected to

perform better (Heilman, Martell & Simon, 1998), and are therefore favoured over women in the selection process for male gender-typed jobs (Davison & Burke, 2000).

Performance is likewise evaluated differently for men and women. Sackett, DuBois & Noe (2001), in an analysis of actual performance evaluation data, showed that women were systematically rated as performing less than men even after controlling for ability and experience, and that the gender discrepancy in evaluations was greater in male gender-typed jobs. That is, as the proportion of women in the work group decreased, evaluations of them were more negative relative to men (Sackett et al, 2001). Given the link between performance evaluations and compensation, it should come as no surprise that women are also underpaid relative to equally performing men (Durden & Gaynor, 2008; Lips, 2003; Roth, 2003).

Violating prescriptive stereotypes by being successful at male gender-typed jobs can also lead to discrimination against women in the allocation of formal organisational resources (Heilman & Welle, 2005). Studies have revealed that, women who exhibited stereotypically masculine characteristics were less liked, and less likely to be considered for promotions or job opportunities, even though they were considered as competent as male employees (Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs & Tamkin, 2004). Violating prescriptive norms has also been shown to be associated with more negative evaluations of women leaders. When demonstrating a leadership style that is more consistent with masculine than with feminine characteristics, women are consistently evaluated to be less effective than men who use the same leadership style (Eagly, Makhijani & Klonsky, 2002).

Women who fail to exhibit the nurturing qualities associated with their gender prescriptions also face formal discrimination. Prescriptive stereotypes can create differential sets of expectations for in-role and out-of-role job behaviours for men and women (Heilman, 2001). Altruistic behaviours, for example, are seen to be less optional for women employees to perform than men. In contrast to men, altruism on the part of women is viewed as fulfilling role expectations, not going above and beyond. Thus, in a work setting, men are given credit for performing altruistic behaviours; they are evaluated more positively and recommended more favourable rewards, while women are penalised for not performing those behaviours (Heilman & Chen, 2006).

Prescriptive stereotype violation can also inspire the withholding of job opportunities, and the willful sabotaging of women's work. Rudman (2008) demonstrated in a series of laboratory studies that women who presented themselves in a self-promotional manner were perceived to be more competent than those who were self-effacing (a more stereotypically consistent presentation style), but were less likely to be hired by the study participants. They were also more likely to have their opportunities sabotaged by those with control over their future opportunities (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004).

### ***Informal Discrimination***

Formal discrimination undoubtedly plays a role in limiting the career attainments of women employees, particularly in regard to their access to key jobs, advancement opportunities, compensation, and the evaluation of their performance (Reskin, 2000). But although it may be more difficult for women to gain access to male gender-typed jobs and to be promoted into leadership positions, some of them are successful at gaining entry. Informal discrimination may confront them once they get there (Rendon, 2003). Descriptive stereotypes can indirectly contribute to informal discrimination: the negative expectations of women's abilities and skills may lead members of the organisation to socially ostracise them, thereby keeping women from becoming central players within the organisation (Heilman, 2001). Because their input may be deemed less valuable, they are more likely than men to be omitted from key discussions, overlooked when perspectives are being sought about important decisions, and left out of informal networks that provide the context for critical information-sharing. Others in the workplace are less likely to come to them for help precisely because they are viewed as lacking essential traits for success, thus creating a system where women are cut off from opportunities to exert influence (Roth, 2003).

Research indicates that not only do women encounter more difficulty forming social connections at work than men do, but they reap fewer benefits from the relationships that they do form (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). Analyses of social networks reveal that men have more extensive social networks that include influential organisational members than do women (Ibarra, 2002).

Working women also report more difficulty establishing mentoring relationships with male colleagues than do men (Ragins & Cotton, 2001). Even when women do find mentors and develop social networks, these relationships are less strongly associated with positive career outcomes such as promotions and compensation than are men's relationships (Eddleston, Baldrige & Veiga, 2004; Forret & Dougherty, 2004; Lyness & Thompson, 2000).

### **The Case of Ghanaian Women in Administrative Professions in Higher Education**

Access to employment opportunities is distributed unevenly and the mechanisms to ensure equal opportunities and outcomes are elusive for women in higher education (Healy et al., 2011). In Ghana, administrative positions in higher education with leadership opportunities are rigid; administrative supremacy starts with the vice-chancellor, then transfers to deans/directors, registrars and then heads of department (Armah, 2009). Being in an administrative position on campus does not denote leadership. This is especially the case for women, as conceptions of leadership in African higher education perpetually leave their experiences in the margin (Johnson and Thomas, 2012). Armah (2009) notes that women are limited in the identities that they may express on campus and they must engage in a 'complex and chaotic' struggle in the hegemonic academic culture that often views women as inadequate (Prah, 2002). In Ghana, women are expected to defer to men in public situations and are systematically excluded from decision-making and influential policy-making bodies on campus (Prah, 2002). Women are often relegated to care work within the universities (Blackmore and Sachs, 2000); feminised work (such as secretarial or student support positions) that is considered to be of little educational or scholarly value to the institution (Lynch, 2010) and exploits women's self-perceptions of low entitlement and worth (Valian, 2005).

Gendered structures, attitudes, and processes 'construct and regulate' the routine experiences of Ghanaian women in higher education (Morley, 2010). Women are also consigned to the 'the informal, invisible, and often feminised work of institutional maintenance and interpersonal services' at universities and are underrepresented in senior administrative ranks (Mama, 2003). Women only make up 13% of the senior administrative professional and academic staff in

established Ghanaian universities and are less likely to obtain an administrative position of any sort within the institution (Prah, 2002).

## **Research Method**

### *Participants*

Ten professional women in five public universities in Ghana were interviewed for the study. Two women were selected from each university; one each from two analogous hierarchies (academic and administrative). They were selected for participation in the study based upon their membership to professional organisations or by using a snowball sampling method from a list of members of two professional organisations.

### *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.

## **Findings**

Upon analysis, several consistent aspects of the participants' descriptions of their lives emerged. First, each woman described key mechanisms in their contexts that enabled their sense of accomplishment as professionals, highlighting the role of family, faith, agency, and education in career success, throughout their lives. Moreover, the participants in this study perceived themselves as having multiple identities in their work and communities that often overlapped.



According to Davies-Netzley (1998), women managers are marginalised by a work situation characterised by mostly male peers. This is true of almost all the women interviewed for this study.

One's background or childhood can become the basis upon which they build their entire lives. Of the ten women interviewed, half reported they were from poor or working class families. Four of the ten women were from rural or farming communities, which they believe had a significant impact on their lives as far as building their own work ethic. There were many character traits shared by the women interviewed, but two traits exemplified by all ten women interviewed were both passion and ambition.

The next step in building the foundation of one's life is education. All ten women had master degrees; four of the ten women had PhD degrees and three had other professional qualifications. With regard to family relationships, seven women reported their fathers had a significant impact on their education and professional careers, similar to the Roth (2006) findings. When speaking of their parents' values regarding their education, they described their fathers as "very encouraging" while their mothers took a more passive role with regard to professional or career goals. One woman stated, "*My father always told me I could do whatever I wanted*".

All ten of the women said they either had been married or were currently in a relationship. Three of the women had been divorced. Eight of the ten women had children. Of those eight with children, five women had at least one person outside of or in addition to their spouse to help them with the children and/or household chores, including house keepers and baby sitters. Two of the women reported being caretakers for their aging mothers, the other women were not responsible for aging parents or relatives due to proximity or the relatives had already deceased.

Spousal support was also important to the maintenance of a career path and success. All the married women said that their husbands were very supportive. Despite these supportive relationships, gender expectations often prevailed in the home. As one woman mentioned "*I take care of my house, husband and children like all women*".

All ten women held some sort of leadership position within their various universities and communities. Five of the women are members of University Teachers Association of Ghana (UTAG) and five are members of the Ghana Association of University Administrators (GAUA). Five of the ten women were also member of other professional bodies. All ten women also served on Committees and Boards of their universities or participated in other community organisations. Most of the women interviewed stressed the importance of giving back to their community. Regardless of the level of activities the women are involved in, all ten women stressed the importance of a work/life balance.

During the interviews when the women were asked whether or not they had faced gender discrimination, almost every woman interviewed initially said no. After saying no, in the course of the interview they re-evaluated the statement. Upon reflection, all ten of the women reported they had faced some sort of gender discrimination. The women reported difficulties and gender discrimination towards women from the universities. One woman, a professor who had experienced gender discrimination, believed it was just her gender that contributed to discrimination.

An issue that came up in almost all of the interviews was the importance of women supporting women. One woman stated the reason she initially joined a professional body was to forge relationships with other professional women. All the women spoke of the importance of women empowering women and networking. The women also stressed the importance of mentors, both being a mentor and taking advantage of the opportunity to be mentored. One woman stated that a reason women should support other women is so that all women can stay grounded and succeed. She said, *“By supporting and empowering other women, hopefully it will make life easier for future generations of women”*.

The most motivating characteristic of these interviews was the way and poise with which these women handled the discriminatory situations. Although it was very frustrating, none of the women reported experiencing any long-term negative impacts as a result of the gender discrimination they faced. All of the women seemed to take it in stride and use it as a learning experience. They are more aware now of not only how to handle gender discrimination, but how

to prevent it and possibly even use it to their advantage. One woman reported that she would rather work with men, because she sees many advantages to being a woman. She stated that men are “*softer and more lenient*” with her than they would be working with other men. Another woman suggested that women should use their “*differences as women*” to get tasks accomplished.

All ten women mentioned that their career success was entirely dependent upon a great sense of personal commitment. This attribute enabled them to overcome the obstacles that gender created for their upward mobility in higher education. Another strong influence reported by more than half of the women was their faith. The women stated that religion had given them a base for their morals and values by which they lead their lives.

The findings demonstrate how important perception is when considering gender discrimination in academic workplaces. Although, most of the women initially stated they had never experienced gender discrimination, after reconsidering their answer or asking for clarification, every single woman reported that they had in fact faced gender discrimination. Clearly, one’s perception is important with regard to social issues.

## **Conclusion**

Since the purpose of this study was to assess whether professional women in higher education had experienced gender discrimination and as there is no specific index to judge whether or not one has faced gender discrimination, a woman’s perception becomes the most important factor. Regardless of what discriminatory action which may have been taken against a woman, if she does not perceive the discrimination to have affected her, the action is unimportant. However, in this particular situation with gender discrimination and professional women, the reason the women did not originally report to having faced gender discrimination is due to the fact discrimination happens so frequently.

Women, but especially professional women in general, are so often judged first by being female and second by their accomplishments. While women have made great progress in the academic

workplace during the last few decades, the gender discrimination that have been faced by the participants of this study indicate there is still a very narrow socially constructed role of women.

The Ghana Federation of Business and Professional Women offer mentoring programmes for women, women can overcome the isolation from professional networks they once faced. By overcoming isolation and banding together, women can then continue to create their own history. Finally, the more successful women become and the more women that are promoted to higher executive positions in the workplace, the more women will change the future of our nation and culture.

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