



Social-Family Issues as Barriers to Career Advancement: The Perception of Women Employees in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at determining the social and family issues that women employees perceive as barriers to their career advancement to managerial positions in Kenya. The research design was cross-sectional survey was carried out among 400 women employees in the Federation of Kenya Employer's (FKE) member organizations in Kenya. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data. The data was then analyzed using quantitative and qualitative techniques. The results show that family responsibilities and married status both have a significant relationship with the career advancement of women to managerial positions. The implications of the findings for policy makers and employers include that career advancement opportunities should be provided to all irrespective of their marital status and also, there should be the provision of flexible work arrangements to ensure fairness is accorded to women employees.

Keywords: Career advancement, family responsibilities, managerial positions.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Available research in Kenya shows a high level of gender disparity in managerial positions in Kenya. In this regard, *Combat (2014)* in his study on women aspiring to administrative positions in Kenya municipal schools revealed that majority of the decision making positions were held by men even though most of the teachers were women. This is despite the fact that Kenya has enacted an impartiality and gender equality law in its constitution (*Kenya Law Reports, 2011*). Female/male ratios remain highly skewed against women in Kenya.

Several factors have been attributed to the low statistics of women in decision making or managerial positions. Authors from the western world have documented the under-representation of women in management to family work conflict (*Kargwell, 2008*). Literature from the western world shows that women in most cases find themselves in a difficult situation when they have to choose between their family responsibilities and career development (*Valentova, 2005; Greenhaus and Pasasuraman, 1993*).

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Studies done by Claes, O'leary and Ickovics (1992, in Kargwell, 2008) revealed that the work family interface in particular caused a barrier to women which hindered their effort to get to managerial positions. Closer to Kenya, in Nigeria, women are reported to have problems with family responsibilities and work responsibilities (Mordi, Simpson, Singh and Okafor, 2011). Other authors have a different opinion and state that family did not have different impact on the career advancement of women than of men (Kirchmeyer, 1998 and Tharenou, 1999a). Research focusing on gender issues remains scanty in the developing world (Mordi et al., 2011). This study makes a contribution to gender research by determining the social-family barriers perceived by women employees as barriers to their advancement to managerial positions in the Kenyan context.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Research documents that women employees' career obstacles pertaining to family ties are of a more social nature. For instance, Fernandez, (1993) states that the social role of women is linked to their role in the family whilst for men time spent at work is of prime importance notwithstanding that availability at the work place is a prerequisite for promotion. To add to view on the role women, Mordi et al. (2011) state that in Nigeria, a girl child is culturally expected to be on the home front so subsequently, access to leadership positions is constrained by the societal perception of women's gender roles. This alludes to the social view that women belong home. Salami (2007) argues that the idea that women's place is in the home should be discouraged and replaced with a more progressive attitude of educating the women just as the men so that they could contribute their quota to families in particular and society in general. Such a social view can have consequences for women's career advancement.

Several interconnected social-family issues have been cited by various authors as barriers to women's career advancement (Linge, 2011; Emerson 2005). These include family responsibilities and marital status. Marthur-Helm (2006) observes that women in South Africa decline several career opportunities as they are still held responsible for most part of the family house hold work. Li and Leung (2001) state that in Singapore, heavy commitment in house hold and family responsibilities interfere with women's career advancement. For instance, a woman is supposed to take the family roles associated with parental, marital and home maker despite being employed. Subramanian, Arumugam and Akeel (2014) found that family responsibility related barriers hindered women's career development. This was because women had to continue with their family care responsibilities even if they took up more demanding jobs.

A study by Mayrhofer, Meyer, Schiffinger and Schmidt (2007) found family responsibilities to be one important factor influencing the amount of time and energy that a person is able and willing to put to work. A study done by the European foundation for the improvement of living and working conditions indicates that men preferred to work an average of 36.5 hour week while women preferred a 30 hour week. This is to say that women employees preferred a shorter week as compared to their male counterparts. The study showed that family responsibilities as the reasons for women's need to reduce actual working hours. To add to the foregoing opinions, Metz (2005) says that having children weakens the relationship between work hours and input for managerial advancement among women. The above observation therefore, suggests children take away time which would be spend at work to the children and therefore women lose out on putting in the long hours required for advancement to managerial jobs with resultant consequences of lack of promotion. Legault and Chessario (2003) state that time spent at work appears to be a key factor in assessing commitment of employees and employees are encouraged to put in however long it takes to accomplish tasks rather than to set an amount of time to be at the work place. There are also stereotypes associated with some family responsibilities. For instance Metz (2005) states that the presence of children may affect how women are perceived at work like people's perception of women's commitment to work. Such a perception can have serious implications for performance appraisal because commitment is naturally taken into account during performance appraisal as a primary factor to promotion (Legault and Chessario, 2003). The authors added that this observation is consistent with gender based normative expectations that women still generally bear primary responsibility for home maintenance and childcare irrespective of what their employment status is. On the same issue, studies done by (Kargwell, 2008) in Singapore found that women who were able

to bear both the work load from family and work place received help from their husbands except cooking, others received help from relatives and domestic helps, cooks and nannies. In particular the author found that the female employees received support of their relatives if they were in a society is based on the traditional value of cooperation.

Rix and Stone (1984) in Marvin (2006) if women continue to step off the fast track to meet family responsibilities they will continue to be at a competitive disadvantage in career advancement in the current organizational structures. On the basis of the literature review this study seeks to determine if the socio-family barriers significantly affect the women's career advancement to managerial positions in Kenya.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study used both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The independent variable was social-family factors and the dependent variable was career advancement. Data were collected from a randomly drawn sample of 400 women employees of the fourteen sectors of FKE member organizations. A total of 366 responses were received. The questionnaires were sent to the respondents through personal contact with the researcher. The data collection instrument was a four item questionnaire. The items gauged to what extent women employees perceived social- family issues as barriers to their career advancement to managerial positions. Responses were on a likert scale ranging from 1 not a barrier to 5 a great barrier. Further, the women were required to briefly describe their opinions. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and the Chi square test (χ^2) was performed to test the significance of the relationship between social-family barriers and the career advancement of women. The descriptions were analyzed according to the thematic areas.

4.0 RESULTS

The respondents were questioned whether the social view that women belonged home was a barrier to their career advancement to managerial positions. Majority of the respondents (52.5% percent) said it was not a barrier. Another 28.4 percent said that this was a weak barrier. The respondents reasoned that the society was changing and many parents and husbands were educating women so that they could enter the work place. Many families valued the contribution women were making to the family finances. About 10.7 percent said it was a barrier and 3.6 percent a strong barrier. Those who were not sure were 4.9 percent. The mean was low at 2.08 tending towards not a barrier. The Chi-square test showed no significant in the relationship between the social view that women belong home and promotion; $\chi^2=9.327$; $d.f.= 4$; $P= 0.053$ ($P>0.05$). These results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The social view that women belong home

		Frequency	Percent	Mean	SD
Valid	Not a barrier	104	28.4	2.08	1.037
	A weak barrier	192	52.5		
	Not sure	18	4.9		
	A barrier	39	10.7		
	A great barrier	13	3.6		
	Total	366	100.0		
	$\chi^2=9.327$; $d.f.= 4$; $P= 0.053$ ($P>0.05$)				

Next, the respondents were questioned on whether family responsibilities were a barrier to their career advancement to managerial positions. As shown in Table 2, many respondents (46.7 percent) found family responsibilities to be a great barrier. Those reported it was not a barrier were 33.1 percent. Those who were not sure were 6.6 percent. Few respondents (9 percent) said it was a weak barrier and 4.6 percent a great barrier. The mean was 3.05 tending towards a barrier. The factor of family responsibilities was shown to have a significant relationship with promotion; $\chi^2=7.025$; $d.f.= 4$; $P=0.013$ ($P>0.05$).

In part two of the, question the women were asked to explain their responses on first part of the question. Some respondents admitted the factor of family responsibilities was a barrier reasoned that they found it hard to trust anyone with their children especially small babies. They preferred to do less demanding lower level jobs in order to have more time with their children. Some also said that at the work-place, married women were viewed as unavailable or could not cope with busy positions due to family responsibilities. The women observed that that perception was misguided because they could get help from the ever growing pool of affordable domestic workers and relatives. The women said that they could easily get workers to do all types of domestic work like cleaning, cooking shopping and take care of babies and children. Also, in the cities and towns there was transport for school going children so the women could rely on them to help with duties of transporting their children to schools. Many learning institutions had school buses and additionally, there were also private companies which transported children to school and back. Snacks and hot lunch were also provided in schools and this reduced the domestic duties for women. Even, private tutors were available to help children at home with their studies. The option of quality boarding schools was also there for children who did not want to travel to school daily.

Table 2: Family responsibilities

	Frequency	Percent	Mean	SD
Not a barrier	121	33.1	3.05	1.074
A weak barrier	17	4.6		
Not sure	24	6.6		
A barrier	33	9.0		
A great barrier	171	46.7		
Total	366	100		

$\chi^2=7.025$; $d.f.= 4$; $P=0.013$ ($P>0.05$)

The respondents were asked whether being married was a barrier to their career advancement to managerial positions. As shown in Table 3, the respondents who said that being married was not a barrier were 43.4 percent, those who found it a weak barrier 18.6 percent. Those who were not sure were 24.3 percent. Those who said it was a barrier were 7.7 percent and 6 percent said great barrier was. On further prodding, the respondents said that they still had to consult their husbands on employment issues because the Kenyan society is paternalistic and the husband in a family is the final decision maker. Some respondents said that their spouses had helped them get to get jobs, financed them to further their education and subsequently encouraged them to get promotions or even more earnings to contribute to the financial welfare of the family. There were also few respondents who said that their spouses did not approve of them taking jobs which involved travelling or working late. Others said they found it hard to balance the demands of a married life and a job. Chi-square test showed a significant relationship between being married and promotion; $\chi^2=3.543$; $d.f. = 4$; $P= 0.048$ ($P>0.05$).

Table 3: Being married

	Frequency	Percent	Mean	SD
Not a barrier	159	43.4	2.14	1.237
A weak barrier	68	18.6		
Not sure	89	24.3		
A barrier	28	7.7		
A great barrier	22	6.0		
Total	366	100		

$\chi^2=3.543$; $d.f.= 4$; $P= 0.048$ ($P>0.05$)

When the respondents were asked if being a single was a barrier to career advancement to managerial positions, a majority (69.1 percent) said it was not a barrier and 13.7 found it to be percent a weak barrier. The women reported that being single afforded them freedom of making their own decisions and career choices. Those who were not sure were 13.9 percent. Those who were of the opinion that it was a barrier were 1.4 percent and 1.9 percent reported that it was a great barrier. The low mean (1.53) was suggestive

that it was not a barrier There was no significant relationship between being single and promotion; $\chi^2=5.695$; $d.f.=4$; $P=0.223$. ($P>0.05$). The results are shown Table 4.

Table 4: Being single

	Frequency	Percent	Mean	SD
Not a barrier	253	69.1	1.53	.909
A weak barrier	50	13.7		
Not sure	51	13.9		
A barrier	5	1.4		
A great barrier	7	1.9		
Total	366	100		

$\chi^2=5.695$; $d.f.=4$; $P=0.223$. ($P>0.05$)

5.0 DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to determine the social-family issues women employees perceived as barriers to their career advancement to managerial positions in Kenya. The results showed that family responsibilities and marital status had significant relationships with women's career advancement. This is consistent with the findings by [Subramanian et al., \(2013\)](#) who found that family responsibility related barriers hindered women's career development. This was because women had to continue with their family care responsibilities even if they took up more demanding jobs. A sizeable number respondents admitted that family responsibilities were a barrier and they were not willing to leave their babies and children under the care of domestic workers for a long time because they could not trust them. The problem of family responsibilities was not however perceived as intense in Kenya as in the Western world where women had to choose between their families and career advancement to managerial positions ([Valentova, 2005](#); [Greenhaus and Pasasuraman, 1993](#)). In Kenya, women found they could easily use the abundant affordable domestic workers to carry out family work load like domestic chores. This finding was similar to that of [Kargwell, \(2008:10\)](#) who found that in Singapore, women who were able to bear both the work load from family and work place received help from their husbands except cooking, others received help from relatives and domestic helps, cooks and nannies. In Kenya, women were able to invest more time in their work.

This study found that there was a significant relationship between marital status and career advancement of women to managerial positions. This finding concurred with observations by [Mordi et al. \(2011\)](#) who found that married women in Nigeria were constrained from entry to leadership positions because they were perceived as lacking full commitment. This perception originated from the involvement in family responsibilities which accompany marriage ([Subramanian et al. 2013](#)). All the same, the single women experienced a less degree of status barrier as compared to married women since they were more mobile and more flexible to more career choices.

In this study, no significant relationship was seen between the social view that women belong home and career advancement to managerial positions. This shows that the barrier is waning. Patriarchy is still prevalent as the husbands still had to be consulted by their wives on employment matters. All the same, the factor was not perceived a significant barrier. Although husbands still made most decisions at home, they still supported their wives in career endeavors by educating them and helping them to get jobs.

From the findings and conclusions, this study recommends that women employees take advantage of the changing social view and accommodation to advance their careers to managerial positions. The findings also have several implications for policy makers and employers. There is need to provide a flexible work environment to women employees to enable them to manage family responsibility roles and career roles. Career advancement opportunities should be provided to all irrespective of their marital status.

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