

Navigating the Labyrinth of Sticky Floor: Challenges and Strategies in Women's Career Progression in a Zimbabwean University

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ABSTRACT

The quest for equal opportunities for women in the Zimbabwean university workforce remains a considerable struggle. Notwithstanding significant progress in women's leadership roles over the past decade, enduring obstacles hinder their achievement of parity with men. The purpose of this study is to investigate the sticky floor phenomenon highlighting the challenges and strategies in women's career progression in a selected Zimbabwean university. The research is informed by intersectionality theory which analyses how social identities produce unique obstacles to women's career advancement. The study utilised an interpretivist research paradigm and a qualitative research approach. Interviews were done to a purposively selected sample of 20 participants from a population of 200. Data saturation was reached at the 15th interviewee. The findings indicated that the barriers to women's career progression in the university include institutional policies, lack of networking, work-life balance challenges, the absence of role models, and gender stereotypes. The study identified strategies such as mentoring programs, diversity, equality, and inclusion policies, work-life balance support initiatives, and increased networking opportunities to help women to navigate the sticky floors and progress in their careers at the university.

INTRODUCTION

The quest for equal opportunities for women in the Zimbabwean workforce remains a considerable struggle. Notwithstanding significant progress in women's leadership roles over the past decade, enduring obstacles hinder their achievement of parity with men, especially within Zimbabwe's distinct socioeconomic and cultural framework (Maunganidze & Bonnin, 2020). The key challenge of women's professional growth is the intricate phenomenon termed "sticky floors," which refers to the subtle but significant obstacles that impede women's progression from starting point to mid-level roles (Gürtler & Gürtler, 2019). Reichman and Sterling (2004) discovered that women face considerable obstacles in attaining managerial positions across multiple sectors, especially in fields culturally seen as male-dominated. Smith and Caputi (2012) highlight that women in these roles frequently encounter institutional barriers, such as insufficient mentorship, limited access to professional networks, and gender-biased employment practices, which perpetuate their position on the sticky floor. Moreover, existing stereotypes portraying women as timid, delicate, calculating, and more emotional than men foster negative attitudes that obstruct their career advancement (Johnson et al., 2014).

A study by Noor et al., (2023) revealed that women are more predisposed than men to occupy low-paying, low-status positions with restricted prospects for advancement. A report by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, 2019) indicated that women in the European Union are disproportionately employed in part-time and temporary occupations, which frequently lack the benefits and advancement chances typical of full-time roles. The distribution of female and male employees in senior positions, underscores prevailing disparities and inequities.

The International Labour Institution (ILO, 2020) reports that women worldwide are 20% more likely than males to occupy low-wage positions, and the gender pay disparity continues throughout all employment tiers. For example, the percentage of female political leaders in Zimbabwe has risen to 31% in Parliament and 45% in the Senate in 2023, primarily due to the implementation of quotas. However, the proportion of women in

local governance has not experienced a comparable increase, as no quotas are established in that domain (IPU, 2023). At present, women constitute merely 12% of local authority members (UN Women, 2023). While these statistics may appear encouraging about equality of genders in the workplace. The makeup of boards for companies registered on the Zimbabwean Stock Exchange demonstrates a significant imbalance: out of 403 directors, only 72, representing 18 percent, are women (Nyahasha, 2018). The limited representation of women in management positions and on boards of directors is attributable not just to biological gender barriers but also to socially created gender challenges (Heilman, 2012).

The United Nations estimates that, if prevailing patterns continue, it will require roughly 140 years to attain equitable representation in senior positions within the workforce. UN Women (2017) emphasised that the comprehensive and effective involvement of women in decision-making is crucial for achieving numerous the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including provision of decent employment opportunities. The objectives of the Zimbabwean National Gender Policy (2017) focus on fostering equal progress for women and men across all sectors, guaranteeing equitable opportunities and consideration in decision-making processes at every level for both genders. Notwithstanding these measures, women persist in behind males in political and managerial positions especially in Zimbabwean universities where out of the 24 registered universities, only three universities have women in leadership positions of either Vice chancellor and Pro-Vice Chancellor positions. These are highest positions in university leadership however, a few women are in the chairperson, deputy registrar, dean and manager positions.

Creating an egalitarian workplace for women is crucial for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals Goal 5 (SDG 5), which focusses on gender equality. Despite the implementation of affirmative action programs and equal opportunity regulations to alleviate these professional obstacles, numerous women continue to occupy their existing low-level positions in Zimbabwean universities. In this regard, this paper contributes to the sticky floor and women career progression discourse in a selected Zimbabwean university.

Research objectives

The study seeks to address the following research objectives;

1. To examine the barriers women, face in their career progression in a Zimbabwean university.
2. To explore the strategies that can be employed to minimise the sticky floor effects on women's career progression in a Zimbabwean university.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical framework

The research is informed by Intersectionality Theory, formulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, which analyses how different social identities, such as gender, converge to produce unique experiences of privilege and oppression. This approach is especially pertinent for comprehending the varied experiences of women facing "sticky floors" due to their overlapping identities. It underscores the significance of evaluating several aspects when examining the obstacles to women's job advancement (Crenshaw, 1989). Women with disabilities may face compounded prejudice that intensifies their entrenchment in subordinate roles. Likewise, working-class women and women from minority backgrounds can encounter restricted opportunities for professional networks and career development initiatives, which are essential for advancement (Atewologun et al., 2016). This absence of access perpetuates their status on the sticky floor.

Intersectionality clarifies how social and cultural conventions converge with gender to sustain the sticky floor. Women from specific cultural backgrounds may face increased pressure to emphasise familial obligations over professional progress, thereby restricting their growth chances (Giscombe & Mattis, 2002). Intersectionality theory offers an essential framework for comprehending the sticky floor phenomena, elucidating how intersecting identities and systemic injustices generate distinct obstacles for diverse groups of women in job advancement.

Meaning of the sticky floor

The term "sticky floors" refers to unseen obstacles that hinder women, particularly in entry-level roles, from progressing in their careers (Smith & Lee 2022). The sticky floors phenomenon indicates that women are, in comparison to men, less inclined to initiate ascension in career trajectories (Gürtler & Gürtler, 2019). The concept of the sticky floor elucidates employment practices concerning gender equality, especially with promotions. Coined by Catherine Berheiden in 1992, the term emphasises that women confronting the obstacles of the glass ceiling are frequently perceived as 'lucky,' considering that numerous others remain ensnared on a sticky floor. In contrast to the "glass ceiling," which denotes the unseen obstacles hindering women from attaining senior leadership positions, the sticky floor emphasises the challenges women encounter in breaking free from entry-level and or low-wage employment, which generally provides minimal prospects for advancement (Booth, 2009; Charles & Grusky, 2004). These obstacles frequently manifest as institutional policies and practices, prejudices, discriminatory behaviours, and cultural norms that restrict women's movement and professional advancement. These circumstances confine women to mid-level professions, frequently resulting in diminished prospects for advancement.

Barriers to women's career progression

Analysis of existing research findings reveals numerous obstacles preventing women from moving from low-level entry jobs (Mattila & Uusilehto, 2019). These restrictions are recognised as contributors to the sticky floor phenomenon affecting women. Some of the obstacles are outlined below.

Systemic discrimination

Discrimination constitutes a significant obstacle that women encounter as an employee. A study conducted by McKinsey and Company in (2016) indicates that nearly all institutions provide anti-discrimination training. Employees lacking an understanding of bias are less inclined to recognise it within themselves, resulting in unfair and inaccurate decision-making. They are less inclined to resist bias when they encounter it. Notwithstanding legislation and practices that forbid gender discrimination, women frequently encounter discrimination and prejudice in the institutions. This may manifest in several ways, including being overlooked for promotions, receiving lower compensation than male colleagues, and experiencing sexual harassment. Carli & Eagly (2018) assert that women encounter discrimination due to the interplay of their different identities and are perceived as accountable for domestic duties both at home and in the office. Discrimination, sanctioned by the corporation as 'common practice,' is ingrained in the corporate culture via interactions and processes, resulting in disadvantages for some groups typically based on ethnicity, sexual orientation, caste, and disability. Patil (2021) contends that gender discrimination pervades the workplace, manifesting in allocation of tasks, promotion processes, and detrimental stereotypes regarding women's skills and talents, which culminate in their exclusion from leadership positions and promotions. Moreover, working moms encounter greater prejudice than non-mothers and males in both professional and familial contexts (Simone 2024). Additional studies identifying the presence of discrimination include those by Rahmah and Idris (2012) and Seshan (2013).

Cultural norms and societal expectations

Traditions from culture and societal standards concerning gender roles intensify these obstacles, affecting professional selections, opportunities, and overall advancement for women. According to Thomason (2022) women face many responsibilities in comparison to men

The notion of "an uneven playing field" accurately characterises the journeys of female legal professionals and their career advancement in Zimbabwe (Maunganidze & Bonnin, 2020). Cultural expectations designate women as primary carers and homemakers, frequently clashing with career demands, a phenomenon known as the double burden. Baruah et al. (2021) assert that women's careers are perceived as secondary, with an expectation to prioritise family over professional pursuits, often resulting in negative casual assessments from family members when they choose career advancement. Furthermore, women are typically socialised to adopt a risk-averse mindset, which discourages them from pursuing high-stakes career opportunities (Simone 2024).

In the home, the status of women is believed to be secondary to men. In private the system of patriarchy women is dominated by men within the household through practices of restricted public movement and unequal division of domestic labour (Simone 2024). Based on the study in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, institutional injustice and work-life balance issues considerably affect career advancement among women Abdulrahman (2016). This disparity shows the limited access of women to the existing pathways to career progression. Women mothers are undervalued because of the programmed gender roles in which the expectation is that they should be more responsible of home responsibilities. When they want to balance their jobs and personal lives, they are negatively impacted on their career advancement (Carey, 2021). Their career ambitions are thwarted because of the belief that the family responsibilities take precedence over their careers (Hutchings et al., (2020). Literature underscores that familial responsibilities interrupt a woman's career resulting in an irregular trajectory in their career paths (Pyke, 2013).

Institutional structures and policies

Embedded deeply within the organisation practices, structures and policies are the systemic obstacles which are often subtle. Accordingly, a study by Cesare (2023) indicated that women mostly come face to face with systematic barriers in their career progression caused by organisational policies and structures. Moreover, the patriarchal culture fosters a masculine work environment, wherein women managers tend to idealise the notion of 'managers as men, men as managers' (Collinson & Hearn, 1995), thereby assimilating into the patriarchal work culture. These elements restrict their career prospects. Numerous workplaces implement policies that fail to tackle gender based, like childcare support, maternity leave, or flexible work arrangements, compelling many women to choose between career aspirations and family obligations.

Lack of mentorship

The absence of mentorship opportunities remains a significant impediment to women's career progression. Numerous leadership and networking avenues are predominantly male-oriented, hindering women's access to essential mentorship for professional development. A study conducted in the UK revealed that British universities persist in hosting particular social events and platforms that exclude women, while males receive explicit invitations, thereby affording men greater opportunities to grow networks and obtain support (Fisher & Kinsey, 2014). The exclusion of women from informal network circles diminishes their visibility and, consequently, their prospects of securing a mentor. This constitutes a barrier to women's career advancement, compounded by the scarcity of female role models in senior executive positions (Anderson et al., 2019). Cross et al. (2019) contended that the presence of mentors possessing suitable skills and a genuine interest in supporting mentees is essential for effective mentoring processes.

Gender bias and stereotypes

Women frequently encounter gender bias and stereotypes, resulting in gender-related challenges at all institutional levels, from securing entry-level positions to exiting the workforce (Acker, 1990). They are often regarded as less competent or dedicated than their male counterparts, particularly in male-dominated sectors (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). Similarly, Ye (2023) asserts that during final employment decisions, interviewers often factor in the perceived costs associated with women's childbirth, leading to hiring refusals. Some companies employ biased promotion criteria that preferentially benefit men, resulting in a "sticky floor" that hinders women's progression to executive positions (Smith & Caputi 2012). A study by Shabsough et al. (2020) indicates that this stagnation and frustration may prompt women to capitalise on opportunities by founding their own enterprises and becoming entrepreneurs. These influences hiring practices, promotions, and performance evaluations.

Negative perceptions regarding women's performance may hinder their career progression (Dickerson & Taylor, 2000). Women's viewpoints are frequently marginalised in policy-making, resulting in workplace frameworks that fail to address their unique challenges. For example, Northouse (2019) asserts that women possess fewer work experiences and are more prone to career disruptions compared to men. These stereotypes contribute to biases against female employees in professional environments. Moreover, many roles characterised by traditionally masculine traits do not align with societal stereotypes of women, thereby

obstructing their promotion and restrictive career advancement prospects. Heliman (2012) contends that gender stereotypes foster biased evaluations and decisions, obstructing women's progress. In a similar vein, McKinsey and Company (2016) reports that few institutions provide training to mitigate bias in hiring and performance evaluations.

Intersectionality in women's professional trajectories

Kimberlé Crenshaw (2017) proposed the concept of intersectionality, which analyses how intersecting social identities generate distinct encounters with discrimination or privilege. Leadership roles frequently lack diversity, complicating the search for mentors and role models for minority women. Women from low-income backgrounds may encounter obstacles in accessing mentorship, professional development, and networking opportunities (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Additionally, women often experience career stagnation post-childbirth due to rigid workplace policies (Blau & Kahn, 2017). Comprehending intersectionality in women's careers is essential for fostering inclusive workplaces that acknowledge and address the specific challenges faced by diverse groups of women.

Strategies for surmounting the sticky floor

To break free from sticky floors, a number of strategies can be pursued. Some of these are outlined below.

Networking

Seals (2021) proclaims that to navigate professional environments successfully and realise career goals, people must have capable networking capabilities. A study by Hefferman (2021) proposes that people with solid professional networks have a higher possibility of getting career chances. Networking attracts mentorship which encourages career advancement. It includes the progression of a person's career and accessibility of chances and the capacity to make notable contributions in the industry (Varela & Premeaux, 2023). By networking one is able to develop career progression prospects, personal development and co-operation (Lauricella et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022). A study by Trust et al., (2016) avows that networking and collaboration are essential in providing professional development. Therefore, Varela and Premeaux, (2023) underscores the importance of forging and cultivating relationships with other employees, experts from industry and mentors to get crucial opportunities, assistance and resources. The above literature indicates that networking provides employees with a higher chance of getting acknowledged and being given professional advancement chances in comparison to those who do not have networks.

Mentoring

Mentorship is very important in assisting employees to navigate the work environment challenges and to advance in their careers. According to Anderson et al. (2019), mentoring programmes provide opportunities to mentors to help develop career roadmaps for the high potential employees. Mentees and institutions however not all institutions have such programmes in existence. These programmes help prepare employees to advance to the next stage in their careers (Chauhan & Mishra, 2021). The mentees are able to build their confidence, develop their competencies and appreciate the workplace dynamics. Hence the institutional mentorship programmes give support systems that enable employees career growth (Stone et al., 2013). Furthermore, the formalised mentoring programmes provide measurable objectives and goals that enhances career progression outcomes and assist in bridging workplace inequalities (Ashurbaev & Khodjaev, 2024). However, even though organisations utilise mentorship as an instrument for women's career progression, it is difficult to measure its effect (Singh & Vanka, 2020).

Inclusive corporate policies

Integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) into an institution's policies and practices fundamentally alters the workplace culture. Inclusive policies should be ingrained in every daily operation and decision-making process aimed at achieving strategic objectives. Such policies seek to cultivate a work environment that not only attracts a diverse workforce but also values each individual's contributions, fostering a sense of

equity (Byrd, 2023; Enumah, 2023). Employees who perceive inclusion and belonging within an institution experience believe that they have equal and enhanced chances of career progression.

In prioritising diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), institutions are expected to overhaul their recruitment, promotion, and retention policies to eliminate biases and obstacles that have traditionally marginalised specific groups (Konrad & Linnehan, 1995). This can be accomplished by implementing blind recruitment processes, offering flexible working conditions, or establishing mentorship programs designed to support under-represented staff in their professional advancement. The training of all employees assists in sensitising unconscious bias which help them in developing relevant cultural competencies (Morgan, 2023). Objective metrics assist in reducing bias related decisions particularly with regards to career progression (Campell-Wray & Durham, 2022).

Work-life balance support programmes

Work-life balance support systems aim to create an inclusive work environment that accommodates, supports and acknowledges the women's dual roles. These support systems are essential for women to professionally self-develop whilst they manage their work and personal duties. For instance, the provision for remote working options and or flexible working hours gives the women to flexibility to tailor their work schedules to suit their personal needs (Khateeb, 2021). In addition, the provision of child care facilities in the organisation and parental leave policies enables women to work continuously without the worry of the care of their children. These types of policies encourage the women's work life balance which is imperative to allow for their advancement in their careers without the added burdens at home.

These measures show the transformative approach to work life balance provides support to their roles, promoting gender equality in both the workplace and the home domains.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study utilised an interpretivist research paradigm and a qualitative research approach to investigate participants' experiences, perspectives, and emotions concerning the sticky floor phenomenon. Turhan (2019) asserts that qualitative research emphasises the meanings participants ascribe to different situations. This methodology enabled researchers to explore participants' attitudes and emotions, which are critical to the research yet cannot be sufficiently analysed using quantitative methods. A case study research design was employed to ensure that the evidence collected directly addressed the problem with clarity. The sample consisted of twenty purposively selected employees from a designated university in Zimbabwe.

Methods of data collection

The study used in depth interviews to collect data as they are rich sources of data (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). In the process of gathering data, the researchers also established a personal relationship between the participants and researcher through the in-depth interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This relationship promoted participants to share their lived experiences freely. The researchers first obtained ethical clearance from the institution and thereafter got informed consent from the participants first before they were interviewed. Confidentiality and anonymity of collected data was also guaranteed to the participants. According to Kekeya (2021) interviews offer chance to the participants being the interviewer and interviewee to share their views of the world, articulate them on different circumstances as well as expressing their opinions. This permits the researcher to probe for further clarification on the vague responses provided. Data saturation was reached on the 15th interviewee.

Data analysis

To interpret and analysing the data, the study used thematic analysis. This method was relevant to our research study which used the interpretivist research paradigm because it aimed to understand the complexities of the experiences of women in the sticky floor with the university context (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). The interviews were recorded and transcribed and thematic analysis was done with the aid of Microsoft Word. According to

Lester et al. 2020, analytical software can assist in analysing data but it is not essential for qualitative data analysis because the major analytical job happens in the researchers' minds. Thematic analysis is beneficial in that it can capture and bring to the surface the intricacies that the institutional structures and the society affect a person's experiences.

The researchers upheld the study's reliability throughout the data collection phase. An interview guide was created to guarantee uniformity in the questions posed to all participants. A case study database was established after the initial interview. It is imperative that case study notes and transcripts are systematically organised, categorised, comprehensive, and readily accessible for future reference (Braun & Clarke, 2024). Additionally, reliability can be reinforced through a chain of data, ensuring that the analysis and conclusions are traceable to the research questions and vice versa (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). The investigators ensured proper citation of all interviews during the analysis, especially in the findings and conclusion sections of the case study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The subsequent findings of the study are outlined and discussed below.

Demographic characteristics

The demographic profile of the participants experiencing sticky floors in this study is broad as it encompasses various ages, gender, educational backgrounds, marital status, work experience, and occupation.

On the gender profile, 66% (10) of the participants were women, whilst 34% (5) were males. It was concluded that the sample consisted of more males than females. In terms of age, 26.6% (4) of participants were aged between 25 and 30, 53.3% (8) were between 30 and 40, whilst 20% (3) were aged 40 and above. On educational qualifications, 66% (10) of the participants had diplomas, 20% (3) had degrees and 14% (2) had Masters degrees. This shows that the majority of the participants failed to upgrade their qualifications. On marital status, 100% (15) of the participants were married and had children. The presence of children in their lives can influence women's career progression leading to them experiencing the sticky floor effect. The study found out the job positions of the participants 14% (2) were in management, 20% (3) were participants in middle management and 66% were participants in non-managerial employees working as clerks, receptionist and secretaries.

Results from the interviews

Through thematic analysis of our study, we examined the barriers and enablers influencing women's career advancement to senior positions. The themes encapsulate the challenges encountered by women and the strategies they utilise to surmount these challenges.

Obstacles to women's advancement in their careers

The interviews revealed the subthemes on the various obstacles women encounter when traversing the complexities of sticky flooring. These are detailed below.

Cultural norms and expectations

Traditional cultural expectations were identified as a significant impediment to career advancement. Most participants indicated that the culture in which they were raised had permeated the workplace, resulting in their stagnation on the so-called sticky floors. One participant remarked, *"Being in a lower-level position is not a choice. I have observed that our male supervisors do not endorse women occupying roles beyond that of receptionist or clerk."* Participant 5.

This finding aligns with Patil (2021), who contends that cultural norms pervade the workplace regarding work distribution, promotion procedures, and negative perception about women's capabilities, leading to their exclusion from promotions. Furthermore, in support of This finding, a study by Maunganidze & Bonnin (2020)

indicates that traditional cultural expectations establish an inequitable environment for female legal professionals in their career advancement in Zimbabwe.

Absence of mentorship and support networks

Networking is an essential activity for cultivating professional relationships that can greatly improve career prospects. Nevertheless, access to these advantageous networking opportunities is not uniformly available. Interviews revealed that certain women continue to occupy lower-level positions due to the absence of support networks and mentorship programmes within their workplaces. As one participant emphasised;

'Women inherently lack support for one another, making it challenging to find mentors. Personally, I distrust my female supervisor who is the department head, since she does not exhibit the appropriate treatment for a subordinate expected from a leader; therefore, I question her capacity to mentor me'. Participant 1.

Another participant stated, *"The institution lacks mentors, as far as I am aware, since I have not encountered anyone being mentored for a higher position... most times when a vacancy arises in a higher grade position, they prefer recruiting someone from the outside to fulfil that role ... also we are not given the chance to network with other people especially outside the institution...only the privileged ones can go to conferences, seminars or workshops to network"* Participant 10.

The findings illustrate the restricted access to networking opportunities within the workplace. This aligns with Anderson et al (2019), who asserts that women's exclusion from informal networks diminishes their visibility and subsequently their prospects of obtaining a mentor. These obstacles are not merely logistical but are profoundly ingrained in workplace culture, necessitating that institutions acknowledge and rectify these dynamics to guarantee equitable networking opportunities for all employees.

Institutional structure and policies

One of the challenges women face in advancing their careers within their institutions stems from inflexible and hierarchical corporate structures and policies that inadvertently favour men. Such rigid structures and policies typically promote conventional leadership styles that marginalise women's contributions and leadership capabilities. One participant indicated that;

'I have observed that one of the company policies stipulates that the department head, who is unfortunately a male, is the sole authority on promotions and dismissals. Consequently, promotions are predominantly granted to my male colleagues, despite my performing better than them, and his justifications are notably ambiguous. Participant 7.

In a different view a male head of department said that; *'I think the final decisions should be done by males 'cos we men do know how to make better decisions. Even the company policies support that...unfortunately for the women, most supervisors are males at this institution.'* Participant 2.

This finding illustrates that promotion decisions at the university predominantly rest with male managers, resulting in structural inequalities. Consequently, this institutional policy may engender biased promotion decisions, obstructing women's ascension to senior management roles within the institution. Furthermore, Cesare (2023) asserts that women frequently encounter systemic barriers to their professional advancement due to institutional policies and workplace discrimination. This underscores a systemic issue wherein the policies and structure fail to provide a transparent or equitable advancement process.

Another participant stated;

'My occupation as an academic requires me to work overtime, particularly during peak periods. As women, we face challenges in managing our teaching and research schedules due to additional domestic responsibilities. It is arduous for us to commit extra hours to help us advance in our careers. Consequently, promotions tend to favour those who can accommodate extra office hours whether it's in academic or administrative positions,in this case it is the men and maybe a few single women.' Participant 8.

This research suggests that reward promotions contingent on hours spent in the workplace disproportionately favour men, so establishing a significant obstacle to women's career advancement.

Gender bias and stereotypes

Workplace discrimination also emerged as a prominent subtheme during the interviews, with several participants recounting their experiences in combating prejudice in the workplace.

'At one time an opportunity for promotion arose in my faculty, I applied for a job...but my application did not go past the shortlisting stage. All I heard was I was not qualified which was questionable as I had the requisite qualifications and experience needed. Someone then told me that the reason that I was rejected was that I give more priority to my family than my job.' Participant 4.

This observation indicates that the notion that professional success necessitates the sacrifice of familial obligations undermines career aspirations (Hutchings et al., 2020). This is in tandem with similar studies in Nigeria by Aderemi and Alley (2019) who indicated that discrimination is a cause for the sticky floor in the Nigerian private sector.

Another barrier for women is the prevalence of gender stereotypes.

'The institution once advertised a managerial post. However,...the powers that be emphasised that candidate must be male...despite the current woman incumbent's fulfilment of the managerial responsibilities. This woman unfortunately was the one who oversaw male employees, urging them to do their tasks, and she would meet the set targets...' Participant 11.

This finding suggests that the company favours a male manager, presuming that a woman is inherently less competent than a man. However, the incumbent's experience in supervising her male colleagues in their roles illustrates her managerial competence. Nonetheless, her professional capabilities were undermined due to her gender, irrespective of her real performance. Supporting this conclusion, Stamarski (2015) and Chidi (2022) contends that societal beliefs persist, asserting that men are superior managers. Which leads to the allocation of more demanding tasks based on this ingrained bias that often goes unrecognised yet significantly influences decision-making, resulting in the marginalisation of women in the university. The preference for a male manager or supervisors epitomises a profound stereotype that men are intrinsically more qualified for career advancement, while women remain unacknowledged by their superiors.

Another participant reported experiencing gender bias upon joining the institution: *'I have observed that when our manager is absent on leave or out on work-related assignments, he delegates tasks to us, consistently assigning me secretarial duties while my male colleague receives high-level tasks. I frequently enquire about this disparity but receive no satisfactory explanation.'* Participant 15.

This demonstrates that women are relegated to academic and administrative roles, which are less technical and lack decision-making responsibilities in relation to their male colleagues. Although occupying the same grade and performing identical duties, this underscores a pervasive gender stereotype that positions women as more suited to subordinate roles. This observation is corroborated by the research of Babic & Hansez (2021) and Stamarski (2015), who assert that gender stereotypes shape perceptions and behaviours, ultimately leading to discriminatory practices in professional work environments. Concurrently, research by Özmete et al. (2021) revealed that women perceived themselves as receiving fewer challenging assignments, being overlooked for promotions, and experiencing less favourable treatment than their male counterparts. This indicates that gender bias is most pronounced in workplaces that disregard the ambitions and aspirations of women.

Work-life balance

Another obstacle to women's career advancement is the ongoing difficulty of reconciling work and life obligations. This sought-after balance encompasses family, leisure, and health, which can hinder women's professional progression at the university. According to one participant's experience;

I have sacrificed my career ambitions for my family and personal life. I require employment to earn money to support my family, yet I also need time to spend with them, which is difficult due to my overtime work. I am confronted with a difficult choice stemming from an imbalance, as my professional life significantly affects my personal life. At the end of the day...one will inevitably dominate the other, complicating the management of both spheres. Participant 7.

This finding indicates in most cases women in the university are torn in between work and personal life and end up being forced to make difficult choices. Research indicates that familial or caregiving obligations disrupt a woman's work, leading to a fragmented or irregular progression in her professional trajectory (Pyke, 2013; Thomason, (2022)).

Strategies for surmounting sticky floors.

Confronted with these complex hurdles, Zimbabwean women can adopt several coping mechanisms to navigate the labyrinth of their career progression. These subthemes are highlighted below.

Mentorship programmes

A programme for mentoring is an essential strategy to facilitate women's career advancement by connecting them with seasoned professionals who offer direction and assistance. These programmes allow mentees to acquire useful insights, improve their abilities, and develop the confidence necessary to assume greater responsibility. Regular meetings and feedback in mentoring foster a supporting environment that enables women to surmount hurdles and barriers while capitalising on possibilities in their professional trajectories.

"Young individuals require accomplished professionals in managerial roles to mentor us, facilitating our career advancement. No one desires to remain in the same positions as clerks or cleaners for decades." Participant 1.

This statement asserts that direct mentorship provides mentees with guidance, support, and assistance in their professional development by equipping them with essential skills, knowledge, and confidence. Consequently, research by Chauhan & Mishra (2021) and The Economic Times, (2023). demonstrate that mentoring can effectively prepare employees for subsequent stages of career advancement. This process not only facilitates women's growth within the institution but also readies them for managerial roles. A survey conducted by McKinsey & Company (2022) indicates that mentorship is crucial in dismantling obstacles that impede women's career progression. This illustrates that mentorship eliminates barriers, remove the sticky floor, and foster an environment where women are urged to succeed in their pursuit of career advancement.

Establishing networks and relationship building

Networking along with relationship building are potent complementary strategies that enable women to advance their careers and realise their ambitions. These concepts pertain to the development of professional relationships aimed at mutual assistance and resource sharing, as well as enhancing the visibility of one's achievements, qualifications or skills to others.

"...I believe it would be beneficial to provide women within the university the chance to engage in meetings or activities designed exclusively for them, thereby enhancing their networking opportunities. Team-building excursions and internal and external workshops or conferences serve as effective platforms for facilitating women's networking." Participant 13.

These platforms can unite numerous women, facilitating the exchange of experiences, advice, and information. In tandem, Babic & Hansez (2021) assert that promotions may be affected by professional network circles, job opportunities can arise from these connections, and leadership skills can be cultivated. When women are afforded the chance to engage in workshops and conferences, it enhances the visibility of both the institution and its female employees. Furthermore, these assemblies can offer a more congenial and collegial environment for establishing professional academic and non-academic relationships.

Inclusive institutional policies

Inclusive institutional policies serve as a strategy for advancing gender equality and guaranteeing equitable opportunities for women within institutions. By instituting inclusive institutional policies and practices, institutions can cultivate a transparent and equitable workplace in which women employees' talents and contributions are acknowledged and rewarded. Such policies typically encompass actions that guarantee equitable employment practices and clear promotion procedures, thereby levelling the playing field and breakdown systematic barricades that hinders women in their career trajectories. One participant declares;

"...here, there is no explicit policy to enhance women's access. Conversely, the institution upholds values of equity and transparency in recruitment, succession planning and promotion processes. They conduct periodic skills audits to assess performance and identify employees' newly acquired competencies. However, ...I believe that, a dedicated policy acknowledging skill advancement or succession planning would be beneficial for our promotion." Participant 12.

This finding indicates that an institution's policy should be designed to promote gender equality. Stamarski (2015) corroborates this, noting that policies formulated without considering gender effect often exacerbate existing inequalities. This approach is essential for improving policies, as it ensures that career advancement decisions are made equitably, providing women equal opportunities to progress based on merit and eliminating workplace biases. However, a fundamental issue with policy formulation persists when an institution often promise one outcome while delivering another. This challenge necessitates innovative thinking and a comprehensive transformation of workplace cultures (Sharan, 2024).

Work-life balance support mechanisms

The objective of programmes that provide assistance for work-life balance is to establish an inclusive and accommodating workplace that recognises and facilitates the dual responsibilities many women undertake. As highlighted in the response below;

"What is lacking in our institution is the establishment of childcare facilities and increased flexibility regarding working hours, as it is predominantly women who assume childcare responsibilities. As women, we require flexibility, such as remote work options or flexible hours, to effectively balance professional and domestic life." Participant 14.

The necessity for institutions to establish childcare facilities and provide more adaptable working hours, highlights the practical difficulties women frequently encounter in reconciling their professional and caregiving responsibilities. Support mechanisms for work-life balance are essential for empowering women to advance professionally while managing personal and familial obligations. Such arrangements ensure that women need not choose between their careers and families (Khateeb, 2021). Bett et al. (2022) contend that policies like flexible hours and remote work can substantially assist employees in navigating their work-life balance. This significant initiative guarantees that women are not compelled to choose between career advancement and family commitments, thereby fostering a harmonious work-life balance.

Comparative lens of the findings

The above findings of this study echo the results from other research studies. For example, a study of the sticky floor phenomenon in 11 states in the universities in the United States of America indicated that the under-representation of women in leadership roles substantiates the sticky floor phenomenon and raises issues about equitable labour practices, including advancement in careers, gender diversity, and inclusivity (Long et al., 2023). Meanwhile, a South African study by Muleya and Maqubela (2025) on sticky floors in rural based universities indicated that despite significant efforts to assist female academics at higher education institutions, these institutions continue to be primarily dominated by men throughout several career sectors, especially in academic environments where female professionals face obstacles to progress. Other studies also claim that the sticky floor phenomenon that exists on organisations has resulted in women being weak and vulnerable therefore unable to pursue career progression (Ahmad & Naser 2015; Deschacht et al., 2017). These findings

illuminated that women persistently encounter many challenges in climbing the ladders of their careers, resulting in their restricted representation in top academic positions and leadership roles. In tandem with the findings of this study, these researches also demonstrate that a confluence of personal, societal, and institutional barriers hinder women's career progression inside academic institutions.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the primary factors hindering women's in advancing in their careers include institutional policies, networking, work-life balance challenges, the absence of role models, and gender stereotypes or biases. Additionally, the study identifies practical solutions such as mentoring programs, diversity, equality, and inclusion policies, work-life balance support initiatives, and increased networking opportunities for women to enable women to progress in their careers within the institution.

Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the small sample size and specific areas targeted may hinder the generalisability of the results to other universities or contexts. Additionally, the study exclusively focusses on the perspectives of the interviewed women; incorporating viewpoints from other individuals within various universities would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the sticky floor phenomenon. The research employed only qualitative methodology. Nevertheless, despite these constraints, the findings will be beneficial not only for women seeking to overcome barriers but also for institutions aiming to implement equitable opportunities for all individual employees.

For future research, the study recommends employing a mixed methods technique and expanding the sample size to incorporate other perspectives in different contexts and settings. Additionally, it advocates conducting a comparative analysis with other institutions from varying cultural backgrounds to obtain a comprehensive understanding and assess any differences.

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