

**BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING: LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT  
OF WOMEN IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS IN RIVERS STATE,  
NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

*This paper focused on breaking the glass ceiling as a way of dispelling restrictions of women into higher positions of trust. Women have over the years suffered oppression, discriminations and rejections from the society due to the fact that they are always addressed as weaker vessels. This discourse highlighted several leadership developments of women in Nigeria and tertiary institutions disproving the tag of “weaker vessels”. The paper looked at the concepts of glass ceiling, breaking the glass ceiling, barriers to women leadership development, leadership development in Nigerian women, Nigerian women in tertiary institutions and leadership development of women in tertiary institutions in Rivers State. It adopted Feminist theory as its theoretical frame work and concluded that some women in tertiary institutions in Rivers State have broken the restriction by climbing to the highest office in their institutions and performed creditably. The society should therefore remove every obstacle that prevents women from rising to the peak of their career. Appointment into higher positions of trust should be based on qualifications, experiences and capacity to eschew conflict and enhance greater output and productivity.*

**Keywords:** Breaking the glass ceiling, Leadership Developments, Women in Tertiary Institutions, Feminist Theory.

## **Introduction**

In this contemporary period where knowledge has become very advanced, it is pertinent and useful for every gender to be an agent of change, who plans, organizes and directs the resources of their institutions to achieve avowed objectives. Several women of this age have been working with an immense value as transformational leaders of great repute locally and internationally. Few examples are: Margaret Hilda Thatcher, the first female Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and Theresa May the second female Prime Minister; Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the United States of America House of Representatives; Kamala Davi Harris, who has just been sworn in as the Vice President of the United States of America; Christine Lagarde Madeleine Odette – the President of European Central Bank (Young, 2021; Wallenfeldt, 1999; Tikkanen, 2021; McNamee, 2020; Cark, 2021). It is incontrovertible to assert that enormous women have held and are still holding positions of trust and high credence both in developed and developing economies. It is also believed that advancement of women into key leadership positions in Government, education, and business, is a positive sign of change that leadership positions are not only for male folks.

There are empirical evidences of women in academics who have performed creditably and indefatigably, ensuring that tertiary institutions put under their leadership are rated highly. The fact that tertiary institutions are known as centre of excellence, human capital formation and national economic planning and development makes some governments and its people skeptical of women leadership. Conversely, the views and mindset of an average individual has been changing about the leadership of women in this modern time. Worthy of note is the fact that no one gender has the monopoly of knowledge, skills and competencies to handle all the problems and quandaries confronting the society in general and institutions of higher learning in particular the world over.

In this 21<sup>st</sup> century, talents and skills which are essential tools for leaders to ensure adequate management of both human and material resources should be bestowed on any individual irrespective of the gender. Every organization needs 21<sup>st</sup> century skills for its leader to transform it for growth, expansion and societal satisfaction. A woman with transformational skills, managerial acumen, human and conceptual capabilities with the assistance of

an effective subordinate can definitely out perform a man who do not fathom his job descriptions or understand the vision and mission of his organization.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, leadership traits were studied by scholars to determine what made certain people great leaders which brought about great man theories. These theories called the “great man” theories focused on identifying the innate qualities and characteristics possessed by great social, political and military leaders (Northouse, 2010), mostly associated with man (Parker & Ogilvie in Davis & Maldonado, 2015). This study believed that people were born with these traits and only “great” people possessed these characteristics (Ott, Parkes & Simpson, 2008). It implies that women can also possess these characteristics and traits to be great leaders too in our socio-economic and political enclave. Horsford (2012) also stated that such theories have not similarly explored the natural, inborn or divine gifts and traits associated with the “great woman” and certainly not women of disadvantage and color.

Recently, there has been proliferation of literature on women’s leadership and styles; nevertheless, few studies explore leadership development of women in tertiary institutions in Nigeria and none in Rivers State. This paper therefore fills the gap in knowledge. In order for this paper to be presented articulately, the concept of breaking the glass ceiling, barriers to women leadership opportunities, leadership development in women, theories and leadership experiences of women in tertiary institutions in Nigeria in general and Rivers State in particular are presented.

## **Conceptual Clarifications**

### **Breaking the Glass Ceiling**

It will be consequential to comprehend the meaning of “glass ceiling” in order to fathom the concept of breaking the glass ceiling. Glass ceiling was propounded by a management consultant, Marilyn Loden in 1978. Glass ceiling is an invisible upper limit in corporations and other organizations above which it is difficult or impossible for women to rise in the ranks (Okowagbo, 2017). Glass ceiling is metaphor for the hard-to-see informal barriers that keep women from getting promotions, pay raise and further opportunities (Obodo, 2018). It is a discriminatory constraint of illustration used to represent an undetectable obstruction that prevents a particular demographic attaining certain level in position. It is a figurative statement used to defeat invisible barriers of women in an organization from ascending to a particular level

(Burkett, 2005). It could be subtle yet harming type of separation where one can't achieve the opportunities before her, regardless of one's suitability and best efforts. Imperatively, this disappointment isn't the consequences of an absence of one's ability and experience, or in light of the fact that women haven't made enough effort. Rather, it is the tag of discrimination as weaker vessels to occupy certain positions.

The United State Federal Glass Ceiling Commission in Obodo (2018) defines glass ceiling as the unseen yet unbreakable barrier that keeps minorities and women from rising to the upper wings of the corporate ladder regardless of their qualifications or achievements. In a nutshell, it is the unseen yet unbreakable barrier that restrains women from attaining to the zenith of the corporate ladder regardless of their ingenuities, qualifications or level of attainments. Women are always seen and referred as weaker vessels which placed the barriers that prevent them from reaching to higher positions in the organization irrespective of their achievements and qualifications in ancient time.

Breaking the glass ceiling means to rise in rank of an organization or succeed in an industry in spite of unspoken restrictions that prevent your advancement (Smithson in Okowagbo, 2017). It is the possibility of the women getting into the higher echelon in their workplace with their knowledge, qualifications, skills and achievements. To have an organization or institution that effectuates quality output and greater productivity, all gender ought to be sharing organizational/institutional rewards equally such as promotions, recognitions and attainments in ranks. There should be no ceiling to any person no matter the sentiment. It would be reasonable if the barriers to women leadership opportunities are broken.

### **Barriers to Women Leadership Opportunities**

Many organizations/institutions of higher learning caused so many female officers to end their career in a haphazard manner due to ceiling placed on them. Barrier in any institution is precarious and capable of devastating the entire system because it is a form of right denial. Barriers to leadership opportunities are a global phenomenon where women, when compared to men are disproportionately concentrated in lower-level and lower-authoritative leadership positions (Northouse, 2010). These barriers are generally perceived to be against women, but to a larger extent are the minority groups in the midst of the majorities. This sentiment also speaks volume among the American

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women and African American women. The African-American women are the minorities while the American women, the majorities which is known as barrier. This aphorism spurred Parker, Talley-Ross in Parker and Ogilvie in Davis and Maldonado (2015) to opine that African-American women report that racism, rather sexism, is the greatest barrier to opportunities in dominant culture organizations. However, the focus of this researcher is not on the impact of race on leadership in dominant culture organizations.

In Nigeria, the barrier on majorities and minorities has persistently dragged the nation to the mud bringing setbacks and inimical outcomes to opportunities. The structural disparities between the Northern and Southern Nigeria should be seriously addressed. This is the reason Ogbuorji (2009) averred that the majority should avoid the minority's discrimination to have a well focused and productive economy. Ransford and Miller in Davis and Maldonado (2015) suggested that attitudes towards women continue to be profoundly affected by passed and current racial oppression. The male folks of an organization always see women as weaker vessels and beings that should be under their control that should not attain the highest positions in the organization. This they do by preventing women from being their head and refusing the fact that anybody can be a leader if that person has the capacity

This corroborate with the assertion of Eagly (2005) that to capture the qualities of leaders that facilitate positive outcomes, leadership barriers should be dispelled on women because firms/institutions need leaders who will obliterate them from deleterious situations and itemize best mechanism that facilitates positive outcomes without considering gender.

When the female gender role is at variance with a leader role, resentment among employees will be colossal and not easily rectified; people are unaccustomed in many organizational contexts to women possessing substantial authority that encompasses decision-making power (Eagly, 2005). Eagly also contends that not only do people doubt that women possess the appropriate competences, but also they may resent the overturning of the expected and usual hierarchical relation between the sexes.

Leadership development in women expands the capacity of individual women to perform in leadership role within organizations. Leadership roles are those essential and fundamental roles that facilitate the execution of a company's and institution's mechanism and strategies through building alignment, wining mindshare and growing the capabilities of others (Wikipedia in Alete-Omoni, 2015).

Double standards for female and male leaders are still perpetuated in today's workplace. In all cases, women face quandaries and challenges when working in male-dominated organizational cultures because to actualize fully the outlined goals, women definitely have to adapt to the organizational culture by taking on male attitudes and values. Corporate policies and practices subtly maintain the status quo by keeping men in positions of corporate power (Lockwood in Alete-Omoni, 2015). Sczesny (2003) indicated that holding leadership roles could be problematic for women because the schemas that people hold of leaders are different from those they hold of women. Heilman (2011) also made a stereotypical assumption about the gender differences between men and women, make conditions difficult for women to obtain the opportunity to be placed in senior leadership positions.

Conversely, women leaders have been described as sensitive, caring, compassionate, responsive, democratic, participative and nurturing (Fisher & Koch, 2011). Female leadership styles offer attributes such as being collaborative, inclusive, democratic and participative (Northouse, 2010). Female leadership styles are also credited with effectively managing and inspiring performance and possessing high levels of cultural competence (Traub, 2011). Women always undergo those activities that improve their skills, abilities and confidence as leaders whenever they assume higher positions. Women are scarce in top leadership positions and the managerial parity between men and women continues on a downward trajectory. A September 28, 2010, Wallstreet journal article titled: *Slow Progress for Women in Management Positions* reported that at the rate women are moving into management- from 39 percent to only 40 percent of all management positions in the past 10 years women won't realize managerial parity in the near future (Silverman, 2010).

### **Leadership Development in Nigerian Women**

According to Glazer-Ramo (2011), more women earn professional degrees for entry into traditionally male professions, women experience isolation, exclusion from informal networks, and systemic discrimination. Assessing from the ancient ages, women in developed and developing countries such as Nigeria have suffered great peril while aspiring for leadership positions. In spite of the ceiling, women still rose to the leadership positions and were very proverbial and radiant. Great women such as Queen Idia, the blessed mother of Esigie the Oba of Benin who ruled from 1504 to 1550; the

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FESTAC MASK, Iyoba Idia's visage was the most widely known captivating face of an African royal women after the Egyptian Queen. Mrs. Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti was a woman of substance. She was the first female student to attend the Abeokuta Grammar School. She established the Abeokuta women's union and fought for women's right. She was a trail blazer and broke the glass ceiling during her time. Queen Amina of Zaria was assumed to be the most powerful woman in the history of Nigeria. She was the first woman to become the Sarauniya (Queen) in a male dominated society. She expanded the territory of the Hausa people of North Africa to its largest border in history (African Feminist Forum, 2016). She indeed broke the glass ceiling.

Margaret Ekpo was the foremost activist in Nigeria. She was a women leader, pioneer parliamentarian and human right activist who contributed immensely to the political development during the colonial days and was seriously involved in the struggle for independence. Above all, she was a member of the Eastern region House of Chiefs, breaking the glass ceiling as no woman before her had attained such position which was an exclusive preserve of men. In the area of sports, Mary Onyali won the 1994 100 metres Commonwealth games title, making her the first Nigerian to win a gold medal in Commonwealth games. Others are: Hajia Gambo Sannabo, Efunshola Anuwura Iyalode of Ibadan.

In recent history some of the outstanding women who broke the glass ceiling in different areas of human endeavour are: Dr. Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, Chinyere Kalu, Professor Dora Akunyili and Mrs Folorunso Alakija to mention but a few.

Dr. Ngozi Okonjo Iweala is a development Economist. She sits on the Boards of Standard chartered Bank, Twitter, Global Alliance for vaccines and Immunization (GAVI) and the African Risk capacity (ARC). Previously she spent a 25 years career at the world Bank as a development economist, scaling the ranks to the number two position of the managing director operation (2007 – 2011). She also served two terms as finance minister and head of economic team in Nigeria. Indeed, she was the first woman to be appointed as Minister of Finance in Nigeria. She is currently contesting the position of Director General, World Trade Organization (WTO).

Chinyere Kalu broke the glass ceiling by being the first female Nigerian commercial pilot to fly an aircraft (Daniel, 2017).

Professor Dora Akunyili was the first female to be appointed Director General of National Agency for Food and Drug Control (NAFDAC). During

her tenure in office, NAFDAC was sanitized to the admiration of Nigerian and the International Community. Her superlative performance in NAFDAC earned her wide recognition in both Nigeria and abroad and contributed to her appointment as Minister of Information in Nigeria under the administration of President Yar' Adua (Makgetla, 2009).

Next on the line is Mrs Folorunso Alakija. She oversees several business endeavours such as : FAMFA oil Limited, her family's oil exploration and production business as Vice Chairman, seeing to its strategic planning and day to day administration. She is indeed the first female in Nigeria to own an oil block. She is also the first female to be appointed as Chancellor of a public University in Africa. She is also a board member of the Commonwealth Business Forum.

In the area of Education, among many others two women are outstanding. They are: Grace Alele Williams, and Professor Mrs Bolanle Awe.

Professor Grace Alele Williams was the first female Vice Chancellor of the University of Benin and the first female vice chancellor in Nigeria thereby breaking the glass ceiling. She was a Professor of Mathematics and the first female to receive a Doctorate Degree in Nigeria. In the same vein, Professor Bolanle Awe is a retired Professor of oral History at the University of Ibadan and head institute of African studies. She has held several positions in Nigeria and across the world and performed very well. Due to her uncommon contribution to the development of Nigeria she was honoured as officer of Federal Republic of Nigeria.

These great women fought (many are still fighting) a good fight in their various leadership positions yet women glass ceiling of restriction is still on the increase and practiced at all levels of human endeavor.

According to Meyerson and Fletcher (2000), the limited progress of minority female executives has also been attributed to a glass ceilings, an invisible barrier to advancement based on attitudinal or organizational biases in increasingly, competitive global markets. Firms are recognizing that barriers to the advancement of southern minority women can be detrimental to organizational effectiveness.

### **Nigerian Women in Tertiary Institutions**

Despite the barriers to women leadership positions in tertiary institutions in Nigeria, women are still making fascinating and strenuous efforts at climbing the ladder. History carries it that Grace Alele Williams was



the first Nigeria woman to receive a doctorate degree and the first vice-chancellor at the famous University of Benin, Benin City, south-south Nigeria. Lilian Imuetinyan Salami is a Nigerian academic and second female vice-chancellor at the famous University of Benin. Deborah Enilo Ajakaiye was the female geophysics professor in Africa and her work in geophysics has played an important role in mining in Nigeria. Professor (Mrs.) Bolanle Awe was a foremost and internationally professor of Oral History. She was the head of the Institute of African studies, University of Ibadan. The Institute under her leadership used to be one of the best globally. These foremost and famous women leaders and great academics performed credibly well in the leadership positions they occupied in Nigeria.

Most recently, history reveals that some amazons aroused in the education sector in some of the famous Universities in Rivers State, Nigeria. Such legendaries are Professor Rosemund Dienne Green Osahogulu, the first female vice-chancellor and immediate passed vice-chancellor, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education ( IAUE) Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt. Professor Opuenebo B. Owei was an acting and first female Vice Chancellor of the Rivers State University (former Rivers State University of Science and Technology, Port Harcourt). These great women of substance and esteemed values were not limited in scope and repudiated the ideas of glass ceiling restrictions and team of other women of great thinking. Good women are great mothers who desire the best for her child (Alete-Omoni, 2015). This assertion accounts for the reasons that aroused these great women leaders to perform effectively and efficiently in their various offices.

### **Leadership Experiences of Women in Tertiary Institution in Rivers State, Nigeria**

Leadership styles of various female leaders in tertiary institutions in Rivers State, Nigeria have significantly impacted in individual students and to the nation. Their leadership encompasses collaboration, responsiveness, activeness and caring. Their leadership development has dispelled the habit of Luke warmness and lackadaisical attitude among employees and subordinates in their various institutions. According to Alete-Omoni (2015), active leader averts murky objectives and strengthens workforce in an organization.

Professor Rosemund Dienne Green was the first Female Vice Chancellor of IAUE in 2003. During her tenure the entire workforce and students experienced an immense improvement in the University administration. This was acknowledged by the then governor of Rivers State,

Excellence Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi who stated that her appointment was purely on merit and commended her for hard work, transparency and transformation of the institution. In the same vein, the Most Reverend Ignatius Kattey (JP) commended her for high performance in infrastructural development and academic standard. (The Tide News, 2013). Before her appointment as the Vice Chancellor, she was the acting Vice Chancellor and held other prominent leadership positions in her University.

At the Rivers State University, Professor O.B. Owei was the first female acting Vice Chancellor of the University therefore breaking the glass ceiling. Before becoming the acting Vice Chancellor, she had held other prominent position in the University such as Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academics), Dean Faculty of environmental science, HOD Urban and Regional Planning, and member Governing council of Bowen University (RSU project, 2019).

Apart from the office of Vice Chancellor over the years men have held sway as Registrars of Tertiary Institutions in Rivers State. But in recent development women have broken the glass ceiling in this direction. This is to say that many women have been appointed Registrars of tertiary institutions in Rivers State. Cases in point are the University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University and Ignatius Ajuru University of Education.

At the University of Port Harcourt, the following women served as Registrars and distinguished themselves in the office – Dr (Mrs) Chris Tamuno .A., Mrs Matilda Nnodim, Mrs Dorcas Otto, Currently, Dr (Mrs) Charles – Granville, .D. is the Registrar of the University (Inaugural lecture-University of Port Harcourt, 2013; University of Port Harcourt 18<sup>th</sup> convocation, 2001; Uniport connect, n.d).

At the Rivers State University of Science Technology (Now Rivers State University) Mrs V.T. Jambo and Mrs. Daba Odimabo respectively broke the glass ceiling on their appointment as Registrar of their University (CINFORES, 2021)

At Ignatius Ajuru University of education current Registrar Mrs Hope Kue – Ikoro broke the glass ceiling as the first female Registrar to be appointed since the establishment of the institution.

These women who broke the glass ceiling distinguished themselves in the different areas of their service. This proves that leadership is not limited to gender, race or ethnicity.

### **Feminist Theories**

This paper was anchored on feminist theory. Research on feminism examined feminist perspectives on the oppression and discrimination against women. Key researchers on feminist discourse include Liz Stanley, Mary Belenky, Gloria Bowles and Sandra Harding (Wadsworth, 2001). These scholars focused on the rights of women. Feminism's presence has come about precisely because many women have repudiated men's interpretation of their lives (Gofffried in Davis & Maldonado, 2015).

All through the majority of Western history, women were limited to homegrown circle, while public life was saved for only the men. In middle age Europe, women were denied the opportunity to own properties to consider or take an interest in public domain. Towards the finish of the nineteenth century in France, women were restrained to cover their head in broad daylight and in piece of Germany; a spouse actually reserved the privilege to sell his wife. Even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women were not allowed to vote or hold elective office in Europe and some States in the United State of American (Brunell, 2004; Burkett, 1999).

Women were prevented from conducting business without male representative such as father, brother, husband, legal agent or son. Married women could not exercise control over their children without seeking permission from their husband. As if that was not enough, women had little or no access to education and were prevented from most professions. In some part of the world, this discrimination against women still exists.

Feminism therefore is a socio-political and economic campaign of women against gender oppression. Feminism is therefore a belief in socio-economic and political equality of sexes. Though feminism has its origin in the West, it is manifested all over the world and represented by various institutions committed activities geared towards women liberation, rights and interest (Brunell, 2004; Burkette, 1999 ).

The focus of Feminist theory is to understand the mechanism and foundation of sex disparity in the society ( OpenStax, n.d). In a society or system characterized by unequal treatment and opportunity for women, a half of its population will be grossly underdeveloped. This means that its full human resource potential will not be tapped.

In the United State a study reviewed in May 2011 showed that there is likewise a post-education gender disparity between what female and male school graduates earn after graduating from school between 2006 and 2010. The male

counterparts receive higher average of more than \$5, 000 each year than the female counterparts. The first year work income for men found the middle value of \$ 33,150 while female received the normal salary range of \$ 28,000 (Godofsky, Zukin & Van Horn, 2011). Comparative patterns are seen among salaries of professionals essentially all businesses.

Apparently, whenever women face restricted chances for education, their ability to accomplish equivalent rights, including monetary autonomy are restricted. Feminist theory tries to elevate women privileges to rise to equal education, job opportunity and societal indifference across the globe. UNESCO, 2005 & World Bank 2007 summarized that almost two-thirds of the world's 862 million uneducated individuals are women and the ignorance rate among them is likely to increase in many regions particularly in a few African and Asian nations.

It is against this background that the Feminist theory becomes an appropriate theoretical framework for this study.

Women who are striving to succeed in their chosen profession should not be held back by dominant patriarchal cultures and barriers that are based on stereotypes and unfair traditions. If organization are truly committed to equity and access with their ranks, then change must be made so that all employees have equal chances to advance and to be rewarded for their work. Feminist theory can act as a guide in tertiary institutions in Nigeria and Rivers State in particular to update their practices for a more holistic grounding, and by serving as the voice through which social change could be achieved.

Though, it has been observed that feminist theory emphasizes on women and can centralize their experiences and the social quandaries that bear the effect of sexist discrimination. Hooks in Davis & Maldonado (2015), opined that through feminist theory, women can centralize their experiences and the social predicaments that bear the brunt of sexist oppression as a way to understand the collective social status of women in the United States. This theory addresses the conditions for the actuality of men and women against discrimination and oppression among themselves in any reputable institution.

## **Conclusion**

Reliable empirical evidence and experiences have revealed that many great women have broken the restrictions (glass ceiling) by climbing higher institutional ladders in Nigeria in general and Rivers State in particular. Tertiary institutions in Rivers State have enjoyed good and fascinating

leadership style under these amiable amazons as Vice-Chancellors, Registrars and other higher administrative positions.

### **Suggestions**

1. Society should deter the saying that women are weaker vessels and that they should not take assumed masculine responsibilities.
2. Women can do virtually all strenuous jobs through the collaborative institutional strategy.
3. The discrimination, oppression and repudiation of women should be radicated in the consideration of top leadership positions in tertiary institutions.
4. Institutions should aim at developing and using concepts such as “breaking the glass ceiling” to articulate those spaces whose interference and elaboration may produce new relations of power, instead of basing on selfish concept “glass ceiling”.
5. Appointments into higher positions of trust should be based on qualifications, experiences and capacity to eschew conflict and enhance greater output, productivity.
6. Women with great minds should stimulate the interest of the younger generation to ensure full realization of their values, rights and potentials in any organization.
7. Younger generation of women should always aim at breaking the glass ceiling in institutions of higher learning and other organizations.

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