WORKPLACE GENDER INEQUALITY: ASSESSING INTERSECTIONAL BARRIERS EXPERIENCED BY WOMEN OF COLOUR IN REACHING UPPER MANAGEMENT POSITIONS IN THE WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT
Workplace gender inequality affects women of colour both due to their gender and their race. This poses significant challenges within organizations and hinders their progress towards achieving gender equity and diversity. This study aims at assessing intersectional barriers experienced by women of colour in attaining upper management positions in the workplace. Both Intersectionality and Black Feminist theories were adopted for the study. The findings show that women of colour - Hispanic or Latino, Asian, Black or African women, face unique challenges due to the double jeopardy of experiencing gender and racial discrimination simultaneously, which can hinder their progression to upper management positions and they are significantly underrepresented in senior leadership positions. They are also far less likely than others to be promoted to managers. They also experience glass ceiling, intersectional bias and stereotyping, as well as gender and racial biases; wider pay gap and lack of role models and mentors in the workplace. The study recommends the implementation and enforcement of robust diversity and inclusion policies, development and implementation of programs that provide equal opportunities for career advancement and leadership development for women of colour, ensuring transparent hiring and promotion processes to prevent bias and favouritism.

Introduction

Gender inequality refers to the condition wherein men and women are not afforded equal rights and opportunities in various social, economic, and educational settings (Zhu, 2021). Gender inequality is banned by international laws (Save the Children, 2023) and the Sustainable Development Goal 5 aims to achieve equality and empower women and girls and further emphasized that gender equality is a human right (UNICEF, 2015). Gender inequality reinforces power imbalances and perpetuates harmful stereotypes and biases, limiting the potential of individuals to thrive and contribute fully to their societies. Gender inequality occurs everywhere and at every stage of life. It presents itself in personal, family and social relationships and also in institutions and in public policies (UNICEF, 2015) as well as in communities, nations and the global societies. United Nations Development Programme {UNDP} (2022) enumerated manifestations of gender inequality to include: uneven access to

education, lack of employment equality, job segregation, lack of legal protections and lack of bodily autonomy. Others include poor medical care, lack of religious freedom, and lack of political representation, racism and societal mindsets. Gender inequality is evident in the unequal distributions of men and women across industries and occupations (International Labour Organization, 2018).

Women encounter various types of job limitations in 86 countries, and in 95 countries, equal pay for equal work is not ensured (The World Bank, 2022). Studies show that in the European Union (EU), there was a gender employment gap of 10.8 percentages in 2021. This disparity is primarily due to lower female labor market participation rates in these countries (European Commission, 2022). Men hold a higher percentage of managerial positions compared to women, and the gender gap is prevalent in terms of human capital and educational attainment (Lean In, 2023; AFDR, 2015). In 2022, the global percentage of women in senior management positions reached a record high of 32%, indicating progress in their representation. However, despite this growth, women continue to be inadequately represented in leadership roles (Forbes, 2023). Among Fortune 500 corporations only 7.4%, or 37 Chief Executive Officers, were women (United Nations, 2020). In Asia, New Zealand recorded the highest representation of women across various company levels in the region, including 32% women on the board of directors, 28% at the executive level, 34% in senior management, and 43% in the overall workforce. Singapore has the highest proportion of women in C-suite positions, with 14% female CEOs and 26% female CFOs, along with the highest percentage of women in the overall workforce in the region, reaching 44% (Equileap, 2022). In the United States of America, 32.5% of all senior managers are women, while 67.5% are men (Zippia, 2023). In the United Kingdom as reported by the BBC men occupy 62% of managerial positions, while women hold only 38% and in male-dominated fields women are more likely to experience "imposter syndrome," which arises from a lack of adequate representation and leads to self-doubt regarding their own professional capabilities (Indeed, 2023). Women's participation in the formal workforce is lower than that of men, with the global female labor-force participation at around 40 percent, varying across countries (Jacobsen, 2011). Biases and stereotypes contribute to the underrepresentation of women in high-level positions, and women often face challenges in recruitment, training, compensation, and career advancement (Lee, 2021; Wani, Ruchi & Dastidar, 2019; Stamaski & Son Hing, 2015).

Gender inequality in the workplace takes various forms, including occupational gender segregation, employment discrimination, glass ceiling barriers, gender pay gaps and lack of mentorship (Holgersson, 2012; Oakley, 2000). Female employees experience gender pay gap. Women often earn less than men for performing the same work or work of equal value (European Commission, 2023). The gap can be attributed to factors such as occupational segregation, discrimination in pay practices, and limited access to promotions and high-level positions (African Association of University Women, 2020). Discrimination and bias against women in the workplace can also lead to unequal pay. According to the World Health Organization (2019), gender-based discrimination plays a significant role in preventing women from pursuing higher-paying medical specialties and assuming leadership positions. The limited progress in women's career advancement cannot be attributed to a gender disparity in educational attainment. In several countries, including the United Kingdom, France, Sweden, Denmark, Japan, and the United States, the number of college-educated women actually surpasses that of college-educated men. Despite women's impressive educational achievements, the persistent underrepresentation of women in advancing their careers has raised significant concerns among scholars, practitioners, and policymakers across various Organisation for Economic Co-operation Development countries (Kato & Kodama, 2017). Furthermore, women and men tend to be concentrated in different industries and occupations, with some sectors offering higher salaries than others. Women and men tend to be concentrated in different industries and occupations, leading to wage disparities (Blau & Kahn, 2017). Women often face barriers to career advancement, including limited access to promotions and leadership positions. Discrimination and biases in hiring, promotion, and pay decisions contribute to the gender pay gap (England & Bearak, 2014). The unequal distribution of caregiving responsibilities between men and women can affect women's ability to work full-time or pursue higher-paying careers and impacts their earning potential (Budig & England, 2001). Also, lack of flexible work arrangements also affects

women in the workplace. Limited availability of flexible work arrangements can hinder women from balancing work and family responsibilities, affecting their career progression (Kossek & Thompson, 2016). Discrimination against women is also linked to human resources management (HRM) policies and practices that are inherently masculine in nature, as they have been traditionally developed by and for men (Munongo, Shallone, Pooe & David, 2021). These beliefs and practices continue to exert their influence on workplaces, leading to discriminatory experiences for women (Smith & Wesson, 2020; Johnson et al., 2018). Additionally, there is a common assumption that women possess lower mental capacity than men, which in turn contributes to the perception that woen are less suitable for upper-level managerial roles (Mordi, Adedoyin & Ajonbadi., 2011; Kellie, Blake & Brooks, 2019).

While women, in general, face gender inequality in the workplace, women of colour experience additional and distinct forms of discrimination. Native American, Latina, and African women, in particular, encounter heightened levels of gender inequality. Women of colour are faced with the challenge of intersectionality at work. U.S Government Accountability Office also reported that in the United States, Hispanic or Latina women earned approximately 58 cents for every dollar earned by White men, resulting in a pay gap of 42 per cents. Similarly, Black or African American women earned around 63 cents (a pay gap of 37 cents), while White women earned roughly 79 cents (a pay gap of 21 cents) for each dollar earned by White men (GAO, 2022). According to Zippia (2023) white individuals make up the largest proportion (67.9%) of senior managers, with Hispanic or Latino individuals comprising the second largest group (14.9%). Asian individuals represent 6.3% of senior managers, while Black or African American individuals make up 6.1%. Workplace gender inequality remains a pervasive issue globally, with women often facing systemic barriers in accessing upper management positions. Within this broader context, the intersectional experiences of women of colour represent a critical yet often overlooked dimension of inequality. This conceptual clarification seeks to delineate the nuanced dynamics of workplace gender inequality faced by women of colour, particularly in their pursuit of upper management roles. The objective of this study therefore, is to assess intersectional barriers experienced by women of colour in reaching upper management positions in the workplace.

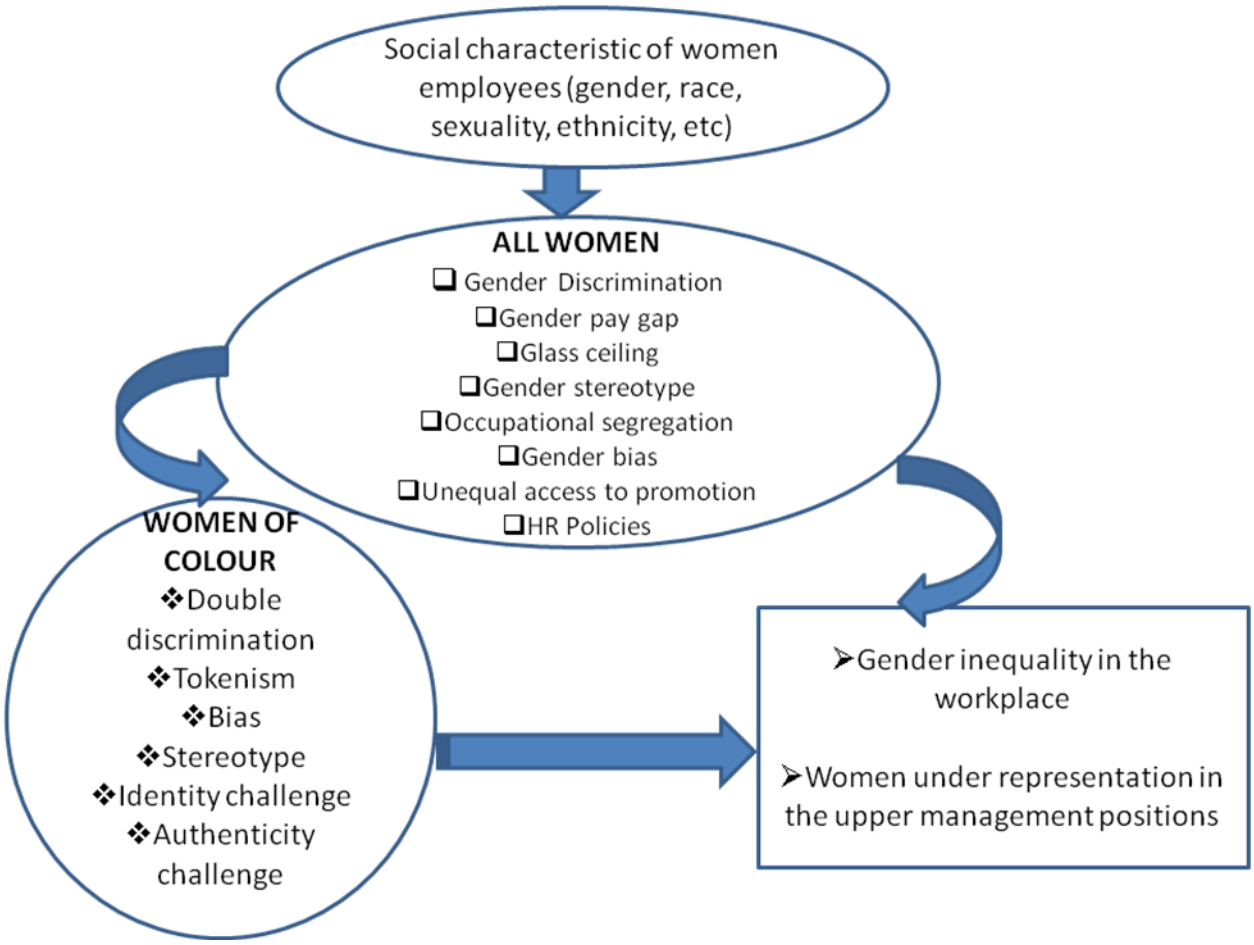


Fig 1: Conceptual Framework using Intersectional Theory: Source Modified from Intersectionality Theory by Crenshaw (1989).

Fig 1 shows the conceptual framework, modified from Intersectionality Theory, for understanding the nature and manifestation of gender inequality in the workplace and which affects all women employee in the workplace due to their gender and doubly affect women of colour for being women and for their race and skin colour as well and thus leads to their underrepresentation in the upper management position of organizations.

Research methodology

Secondary data was utilized for this study. The data were obtained from recent reputable sources of information such as academic articles, industry database and other online empirical publications. This approach was to ensure a comprehensive analysis of workplace gender inequality and to assess intersectional barriers experienced by women of colour in upper management positions in the workplace.

Theoretical framework

Intersectionality framework which was propounded by Crenshaw (1989) was adopted to support this study. The framework recognizes that individuals hold multiple social identities (such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation and more), and these identities intersect to create unique experiences of privilege and oppression. Intersectionality helps to explain how the challenges faced by women in general are compounded for women of colour due to the intersection of gender and race, leading to a more complex form of discrimination and disadvantage. The intersectionality theory also helps us understand that although women face

the problem of underrepresentation in the upper management position; women of colour experience more challenges in the context of leadership and upper management roles due to a complex interplay of gender and racial discrimination.

Black feminist Theory: The black feminist perspective came into being between late 1960's and early 1970's and as a result of the activities of political activist (Burnham, 2020). It is a dynamic and evolving framework that challenges mainstream feminist theories and provides a crucial lens for understanding and addressing the unique experiences and struggles of Black women within the society. Its purpose is to analyze the challenges faced by Black women while also uncovering strategies for liberation. The theory does not only focus on the oppression faced by Black women but also celebrates their lives and accomplishments across African diasporic contexts. Black feminism argues that sexism, class oppression, and racism are interconnected and cannot be separated (Burnham, 2020). Black feminism emerged as a response to the limitations of mainstream feminism, which often failed to adequately address the specific challenges faced by Black women within patriarchal and racist systems. The black feminist perspective emphasizes the importance of amplifying the voices and experiences of Black women, who have historically been marginalized within both feminist and civil rights movements. Moreover, Black Feminist Theory highlights the need to address not only the numerical representation of Black women in leadership but also the lived experiences and perspectives they bring to the table. It recognizes the value of diverse leadership and the unique contributions that Black women can make to decision-making processes and organizational success. By applying Black Feminist Theory to assess gender inequality and the intersectional intersectional barriers experienced by women of colour in reaching upper management positions in the workplace**,** organizations can gain a more nuanced understanding of the intersecting factors that perpetuate these disparities.

Discussion

Women of colour experience gender inequality differently and most times they have worse outcomes. Furthermore, women of colour may face unique challenges due to the double jeopardy of experiencing gender and racial discrimination simultaneously, which can hinder their progression to upper management positions (Avery, Hernandez, Hebl, Wyland, Ryan & Earl, 2018). Bahn and McGrew (2017) revealed that like other women of colour, Latinas face multiple structural barriers in the U.S. labor market, including both gender discrimination and racial and ethnic experience discrimination. Empirical evidence suggests that these dual barriers extend beyond their individual impacts, potentially leading to heightened economic challenges specifically for Latina women.

The 2018 Women in the Workplace Study which studied 664,000 staff members of 279 companies reported that women of colour are significantly underrepresented at work; far less likely than others to be promoted to managers, more likely to face daily discrimination and less likely to receive support from their managers. The study further found out that for every 100 men promoted to manager, only 60 black women are promoted to managers; 40% of black women have had their judgment questioned in their area of expertise while only 27% of men mentioned that; also 35 percent of black women indicated that their managers promote their contributions to others as against 46% of men who indicated same (Lean In & McKinsey & Co, 2018 cited in Hunter-Gadsden, 2018).

According to Zippia (2023) white individuals make up the largest proportion (67.9%) of senior managers, with Hispanic or Latino individuals comprising the second largest group (14.9%). Asian individuals represent 6.3% of senior managers, while Black or African American individuals make up 6.1%. Women of colour are significantly underrepresented in senior leadership positions, with only one in every five holding such roles, and only one in twenty-five being a woman of colour. In England, for instance, Manchester (2021) reported that approximately 1.2 million black and mixed-race women of black heritage are employed across various sectors and organizations. However, these Black Professional Women in England face significant barriers to career progression, irrespective of their valuable contributions, due to a strong glass ceiling.

Additionally, women of colour often face a wider pay gap, which exacerbates their vulnerability to poverty. In the United States women earned about $.82 for every dollar men earned (GAO, 2022). In 2021, the gender pay

gap in the European Union (EU) amounted to 12.7%, and there has been very little change in this figure over the past ten years. This signifies that, on average, women earn 13.0% less per hour compared to men (European Commission, 2023). In the United States women earned about $.82 for every dollar men earned (Government Accountability Office, 2022). In rural Africa, women experience a significant gender pay gap of 40 to 46 percent compared to men. In rural areas, the gender pay gap varies, ranging from a statistically insignificant 12 percent in Tanzania to a substantial 77 percent in Nigeria (Van den Broeck, Kilic & Pieters, 2023). The gender pay pertains to disparities in the average earnings between men and women including compensation, whether in the form of monetary payment, non-monetary benefits, net earnings from self-employment, or total earnings from both employment and self-employment (Oelz, 2013).

The National Science Foundation (2016) in African Association of University Women (2020) reported that black women received over 33,000 bachelor's degrees in science and engineering while 24% of Black women have doctorates in STEM; however, only 5% of managerial roles in STEM were occupied by both Black women and men. Also, stereotypical assumptions and biases about women of colour's competence, leadership style, and suitability for leadership roles can undermine their credibility and opportunities for advancement. This is because women of colour are more likely to have their expertise questioned, be required to provide additional evidence to prove their capabilities and experience in the workplace (Lean In, 2023).

Women of colour often experience subtle forms of discrimination and microaggressions in the workplace (Lean In, 2023) which includes racialized or gendered comments, exclusion from informal networks, and differential treatment in performance evaluations and assignments. Additionally, Limited representation of women of colour in leadership positions results in a lack of role models, networks, and advocacy within organizations, hindering their visibility and access to career-enhancing opportunities. Due to the lack of role models and mentors who share their racial and gender identity, it becomes more challenging to find support and guidance for career advancement (Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2018).

Intersectional bias and stereotyping create additional barriers for women of colour, as they face both gender and racial biases in the workplace (García-Rodríguez & Mendoza-García, 2021). Furthermore, as reported by European Network Against Racism (2016) some Black women have been mistreated and discriminated against because of their hair type and styles and are subjected to the imposition of uniform codes that do not allow them to wear some black hairstyles and classify them as unprofessional hairstyle. Also, Rozina (2016) revealed that some religious minority women face discriminatory stereotypes surrounding their religion because they are referred to as being conservative. Women of colour are differently affected by inequality in the workplace because they are significantly underrepresented; far less likely than others to be promoted to manager, more likely to face daily discrimination and less likely to receive support from their managers. They also experience mistreatment which relates to gender, race, ethnicity, religion in the workplace as well as harassment, stereotypes and micro-aggressions (European Network against Racism, 2016).

Another challenge faced by women of colour is limited access to networking opportunities, such as professional associations or social connections, can impede them from building relationships and accessing influential networks that facilitate career advancement (Cech, Blair-Loy & Hegewisch, 2020). Biases in performance evaluations and promotion processes can disadvantage women of colour, leading to lower recognition of their contributions and fewer opportunities for advancement (Roberts & O'Reilly, 2018).

Shonwumi (2023) in her study in higher education reported that white women do not offer unequivocal support to their Black colleagues and may even undermine their career progression. When Black women gain leadership roles, the traditional characteristics associated with leaders often conflict with the stereotypical expectations of Black women. It is also important to note that Bahn and Cumming (2021) admitted that there is limited research on the experiences and obstacles women of colour face in terms of employment, opportunities for career advancement, and earnings in the U.S. labor market as they are filtered through the interplay of race and gender. Also, McGrew (2018) revealed the discriminatory nature of the workplace

segregation faced by African American women as workplace segregation is seen as profoundly distortionary as it negatively affects Black women's wages and affects their total growth.

The study by Hypolite (2019) which studied "Black Women's Journey to Executive Leadership" reported that black women in leadership position experienced the presence of glass ceilings and sticky floors but they were able to succeed due to their resilience and social networking and they also acknowledged the role of faith, family and friends as well as the support they received from their respective institutions where they work as important factors to their attaining the leadership position

Studies have shown that gender inequality in the workplace affect women of colour differently and often face worse outcomes. Barriers include the lack of role models and mentors who share their racial and gender identity, biases in performance evaluations and promotion processes leading to lower recognition and fewer advancement opportunities.

Conclusion

In all, the consequences of gender inequality are far-reaching and affect not only individuals but also communities and societies as a whole. Gender inequality affects women and girls' rights, economic progress and the human development as well as affects their work and education (UNICEF, 2022). Gender inequality limits countries' chances of progress as they forfeit potential growth that could have come from women including women of colour, who are excluded from the growth processes, education, work and healthcare while limiting the extent to which growth can impact on the poverty status of women (African Development Report, 2015). The intersectional barriers faced by women of colour in reaching upper management positions encompass a complex interplay of gender, race, and other intersecting identities. The barriers which include double discrimination as women of colour are confronted by both gender-based discrimination and racial/ethnic discrimination, leading to compounded disadvantages in career advancement**.** The findings of this study on gender inequality and underrepresentation of women of colour in upper management position is in line with the beliefs and principles of the Intersectionality framework and Black Feminist Theory which acknowledges that the social characterizations of individuals based on race, gender and class creates unique experiences of discrimination as well as privilege.

Recommendations

The study findings infer that women of colour suffer dual effects of gender and racial discrimination in the workplace and thus recommends the implementation and enforcement of robust diversity and inclusion policies, development and implementation of programs that provide equal opportunities for career advancement and leadership development for women of colour, ensuring transparent hiring and promotion processes to prevent bias and favouritism as well as regularly accessing the effectiveness of the diversity and inclusion initiatives and readjust where and when necessary. Addressing workplace gender inequality and the intersectional barriers faced by women of colour in reaching upper management positions requires a multifaceted approach that acknowledges the complexity of intersecting identities and systems of oppression. Strategies to provide mentorship and sponsorship opportunities, and promote diverse representation at all levels of organizational leadership are recommended. Moreover, cultivating intersectional awareness and advocacy is essential for creating workplaces where women of colour can thrive and advance on an equal footing with their peers. Additionally, organizational management should prioritize the attainment of decent work because gender discrimination not only destroys human talent but also undermines economic advancement of societies (International Labour Organization, 2019).

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