



Queen Bees in Zimbabwe: Exploring the Experiences of Women Leaders Reluctant to promote other Women in the Workplace.

Mubango, Hazel

Department of Human Resource management, Women's University in Africa

hmubango@wua.ac.zw

Abstract

This study explores the motivations of women leaders who express reluctance to promote other women in the workplace in Zimbabwe. This study is motivated by the realisation that, though contemporary literature advocates that women are underrepresented in leadership positions, there seems to exist a culture that reflect that the few women in leadership positions (Queen Bees) inhibit the ascension of fellow women into lucrative leadership positions. This study zeroed on the case study approach with 20 judgementally sampled female leaders in the Zimbabwean banking sector. Semi-structured interview was employed to collect data. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Findings from the study revealed major themes of competition where female leaders admitted to refusing to elevate other women because they fear competition from them hence they remove any type of value threats from subordinates; their leadership style is mainly autocratic towards their female subordinates than their male subordinates and lastly theme being systematic discrimination when it comes to promotion, recruitment, employment and remuneration of female employees in the banking sector. However, Queen Bees prefer working with males at the top than females who lack the right attitude towards their work. It was recommended that further researches to be done on strategies to address negative Queen Bees effects in organisations to guarantee the career advancement of junior women in the banking sector.

Keywords: Queen Bee phenomenon; value threat; women leadership; discrimination; career development

1 Introduction

The past decades have seen most women increasingly joining the workforce and some have found themselves in the top-level management positions of leadership in all sectors of the economy although they are still underrepresented in those levels. Their inclusion in those top positions has not been encouraging as it seems that some women are inhibitors of other women to the positions of influence, power and leadership. The Queen Bee is regarded as a bitch that stings other women when she reckons that her power is endangered and Queen Bee is blamed for lack of support for other women (Abramson 1975; Staines et al., 1973).

Studies on the rift between females in leadership positions and their female subordinates have been done (Bettridge (2013), Djaba (2012) and they indicated that women in lower level positions try to bring down those in leadership positions. This cancer according to Bettridge (2013), thwarts other women's opportunities to be leaders. Some studies indicated these battles but it seems there is inadequate research studies on the rift between these female leaders and subordinates in the workplace from the women leader's perspective which this study therefore seeks to fill such gap.

Derks (2016) observes that women are not represented well in management positions in most organisations. Although 47% of the global workforce are women, those in the top management constitute only 6% (Glancy, 2012). A study by Fortune revealed that only 5% of women are CEOs and 20% were board members. About 16% constitutes females in political leadership positions, 10% are business leaders and those who constitute religious



leaders are 13% (Mutsagondo, 2013). In a similar vein, a study by Drexler illustrates that women leaders are also bullies in the workplace. Likewise, a study in 2010 by Workplace Bullying Institute indicated that 80% of the time, women bullies points their hostilities towards other females and the American Management Association (AMA) pointed out that 95% of women admitted that they have been undermined by other women at a certain point in time in their careers. In addition, a study in Toronto in 2008 of almost 1800 US Employees revealed that women who are supervised by other women at work showed psychological and physical stress symptoms in relation to those who were supervised by men. The negative impact of gender stereotypes, lack of educational opportunities, deficiency in leadership confidence and sexism are some of the obstacles women face in their careers. These obstacles negatively affect women to help other women to get to leadership positions in the banking sector (Mwale, 2017). Women supervisors do not support their women subordinates compared to their male subordinates (Garcı-Rtameró & Lopez-Zafra, 2006) conversely, female managers see their female subordinates as less qualified than the males. In this regard, this paper shall explore the experiences of women executives in the banking sector who are reluctant to promote other women in the workplace.

Zimbabwe has ratified conventions on the women participation in leadership as well as crafting its own objectives to achieve the same. In addition, the SDG goal number 3 which promotes gender equality and women empowerment tries to uplift the women to leadership positions however the Queen Bee phenomenon seemed to take center stage in realizing these goals. Zimbabwe Stock Exchange (ZSE) listed companies revealed that only 10% had female directors (Choruma, 2019). A study in 2018 by Techzim found that 403 ZSE directors 18% were women, from a pool of 406 directors of 64 surveyed. The Zimbabwean banking sector management has been dominated by males for some years with a few women holding leadership positions. Some management positions held by women are such that they can uplift and empower other women but it seems the contrary is happening. There is a big gap and an unequal representation in occupational leadership status of females (Shave & Chasokela, 2020). The researcher found that there is a dearth of studies in Zimbabwe investigating the experiences of women leaders in the banking sector who are reluctant to promote other women in the workplace.

1.2 Objectives of the study

- i. To explore the prevalence of the queen bee syndrome in the workplace.
- ii. To determine the effects of queen bee phenomenon in business.

2. Literature review

2.1 Leadership concept

Influencing people in achieving a common goal or vision is leadership (Northouse, 2013). Leadership is a driver that makes leaders and followers chase a shared goal (Summwerfield, 2014). These definitions highlight themes that point out that in leadership there is a relationship between a follower and a leader; the two have shared vision or goals and that it is the ability of the leader to influence behavior and assist in realizing the shared goals. Effective leadership is characterized by good self-character, effectiveness, influencing others, creating a vision,



guiding and inspiring people. Wuetele (2017) affirms that a good leader motivates, increase enthusiasm and optimism in employees so as to achieve the shared vision, to be able to create a caring culture as well as maintaining trust among employees in the organisation. The leadership concept is imperative in investigating Queen Bee phenomenon on the experiences of women leaders who are reluctant to promote other women in the workplace.

2.2 Women in leadership

Although both men and women make effective leaders, this effectiveness depends with the leader's gender (Hoyt and Murphy 2013). Men's leadership style is characteristic of being aggressive, autocratic, dominant, self-assured and competitive whilst democratic, motivating, sympathetic and creativity describes the women's leadership style (Cari & Eagly, 2011). Smith (2002) agrees that, women who were in managerial positions held lower level management positions where supervision of other women was done and they were lowly remunerated than their male counterparts in the same position. Wuertele (2017) opines that women leaders are placed in parenting areas like being a human resources manager or officer instead of being assigned in areas that exhibit firmness and rationalism like HR Director Position. Women leaders experience conflicts between their leadership and gender roles, have less supportive environment, have their competences questioned as well as their ability to lead under scrutiny. In the end the women adopt an autocratic leadership style in such male dominated companies (Kinnear, 2016) so that they fit in.

2.3 The Queen Bee Phenomenon

A study by Staines et al., (1973) coined the Queen Bee phenomenon which describes the female behavior in the workplace that shows discriminatory traits towards other women and them being the only Queen Bee in that organisation. According to Kanter (1977) cited in Derks et al (2011) the Queen Bee phenomenon refers to women who have been successful in male dominated firms and defending their status quo. Meanwhile Abramson (1975) provides that the Queen Bee describes women who have achieved in management and leadership but have a tendency to deny the presence of systematic discrimination against other women. Molatseli-Tsiane (2018) described queen bee as the way in which women knowingly act to hamper the elevation of other female subordinates by scrutinizing their female subordinate's performance more critically than the performance of their male subordinates. Queen Bees regard other women as threats and hinders their opportunities for promotion in leadership and positions of power (Duguid, 2011). When comparing with other men, women are less supportive of the advancement of other women's careers and the denial of existing gender discrimination constitutes a strong legitimization of the status quo.

Duguid (2011)'s study showed that women in leadership positions do not support their female subordinates if there is a value threat - when people feel that the groups, they belong to has more value than other people in a different group. The two types of value threat that can affect women leaders are competitive threat and collective threat. Collective threat being women who think that low qualified women negatively affect the impressions of others about them, on the other hand, competitive threat is when women leaders feel threatened by another woman who is more qualified than them. These threats result in female managers not



to reward their female subordinate with leadership positions and may punish them (Srivastava and Sherman 2015) by blocking their advancement. Staines et al., (1973) concludes that Queen Bee mantra which states “if I can do it without the whole movement to assist me, so will other women’ stands true with this study’s focus.

Some researchers found out that the women in leadership positions criticize the leadership skills, assertiveness and career commitment of their female subordinates (Ellemers et al 2004). In a similar vein, a study by Luckerath-Rovers et al (2013) emphasize that women who are board of directors see themselves as more masculine and alienate themselves from their female colleagues when they compare their educational level with the other board members. This shows that women are their worst enemies and the rivalry among women is a major hindrance in women’s careers (Dobson & Iredale, 2006).

Most women in the leadership positions are surrounded by male subordinates instead of female subordinates. However, this Queen Bee sticker blames women rather than men for the unbalanced career outcomes among women and spreads the stereotypical supposition that women should display solidarity towards each other but those men can compete against each other for the best jobs (Wuertele, 2017). Apart from being a source of gender inequality the queen bee phenomenon is itself a result of gender bias and social identity that most women experience in their places of work. Duguid (2011) posits that, these gender biased environment shape women’s behaviour by stimulating women with low gender identification to distance from other women and to display queen bee responses as a way to attain individual mobility. Such inclination to distancing oneself from subordinates creates an unfavourable environment which may lead to high degree of turnover intentions by the female subordinates. The value that Queen Bees are given at their workplaces also shape their willingness to assist another women career wise. As evidenced above these women leadership are reluctant to upgrade other women to leadership positions.

2.4 Effects of the Queen Bee Phenomenon in Organisations

The Queen Bee phenomenon is prevalent in workplaces where there is legitimization and perpetuation of gender inequality. Compared to their male colleagues, Queen Bees have less zeal and are less supportive to females in lower positions in advancing their careers and development (Derks, 2017). Ely (1994) added that the self-confidence of female subordinates is shattered when they receive negative comments or feedback from their female leaders that the male ones. This is also because women behave uncivil and impolite to their sex compared to the opposite sex (Gabriel et al 2017) hence organisations may face high turnover rate and productivity problems. The patriarchal workplaces have socialized some employees into believing and making them act like women have little power based on privilege, status and power as a result the workplace culture become more masculine which make it difficult for women to support each other (Mzumara, 2020). Conversely women who support other women in the work place yields positive effects for the organisations, for instance increased productivity, increased collaboration and support among employees, gender equality, increased access to resources linked to violence and discrimination as well as increased proportion of women in leadership positions (Derks et al., 2016).

3. Materials and Methods

The study adopted a case study as a research design with judgmentally sampled 20 female leaders working in banks' management positions were drawn from the five major banks in Zimbabwe. The case study approach helped comprehend the phenomenon by getting a comprehensive account of the human experiences and views of participants (Niuwehuis, 2016) of being Queen Bees at their workplaces. Semi structured interviews were used to collect data which was analysed through thematic analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings of the study centered on the themes of competition, leadership style and discrimination tendencies of the Queen Bee phenomenon. These were highlighted by the respondents as the major reasons why women in positions of leadership in the Zimbabwean banking sector are reluctant to promote other women in the workplace.

4.1 Competition

Most respondents revealed that they do not want to elevate other women to leadership positions because they fear that they are going to surpass them in work performance. They feel that they would rather compete with males at the top than compete with their female juniors they have helped succeed to management positions. Some of the respondents have this to say;

I would rather work with males at the top than females who I have helped get to the top because they end up being my competition wanting to take my post than being my ally...there is a possibility that some may even surpass me in performance so I am afraid I cannot take that chance...too risky for me.

...as for me I worked from the bottom from being a bank teller to be an operations director...

Some of us get to the top through hard work and experience and some of our juniors are well educated so when they get to the top it means naturally am in competition with my hard work...they should not get it so easy... I have to maintain my top position and remove the threats.

These findings is in tandem with Sundvik and Lindeman (1993) in Zndria et al., (2020) who propose that leaders view subordinates of the same sex as a bigger threat compared to subordinates of the opposite sex. Queen Bees feel insecure and that their positions are at risk hence it becomes problematic to work with them. Meanwhile a study by Schieman and McMullen (2008) found out that female junior employees experience stress when they report to female leaders compared to male leaders. This relationship between Queen Bee and her subordinates has an effect on the productivity, mental health and the tone of the workplace.

On the contrary one respondent said;

For me being at the top means I have to remain competitive so I do not have any problem having a junior female working with me in leadership or management as am always on top of my game...I like competition from my other females too.

This sentiment above demonstrates that not all queen bees are reluctant to promote other women to leadership positions. This might mean that queen bees in the banking sector also have room for other women at the top and this reinforces their legitimacy and position at being at the top.



4.2 Leadership style of queen bee

Findings indicated that Queen Bees do not support other women to improve their careers by promoting them. In fact, one respondent confirmed that, sometimes, they have to be autocratic to have their work done as they do not tolerate complacency and mistakes that some women junior show. This corresponds with Kanter (1997) who asserts that women leaders turn their back on their juniors so as to retain their power. This scenario is difficult for a woman to be an effective leader because when she assumes masculine traits she is considered as distant and cold and if she assumes feminine characteristics she is considered as weak (Dempsey & Diamond, 2006).

One respondent declares that;

There are some women who are still my juniors although we were employed almost at the same time at this bank. I still work with them however, I seem not to be kind to them as I get easily upset with them for being too sloppy when they do my assignments. I end up telling them what to do, how to do it and when to do it to my satisfaction. So, when an opportunity for promotion or any form of upgrading comes in I have no reason to give them a promotion.

Other respondents bluntly comments;

*When I want my work done, I look for a male employee...when I want to promote someone I look for a male employee...I look for results and I expect respect in my position.
I have noted that most women who are employed in this bank consider me as a role model...which is a compliment to me. However I feel that for them to be where I am, they need to work hard and pull themselves up because I worked so hard by myself to be where I am today...I cannot just hand over success to someone on a silver platter... they have to sweat for their success too.*

This coheres with Kaiser and Spalding (2015) who envisage that Queen Bee would rather work with men rather than women and shows favoritism to male employees. Furthermore, Queen Bees believe that she sacrificed a lot to be where she is and is more committed to her job than the women subordinates (Derks, 2011). The above denotes that women bank leadership had no urge to help other junior women employees who desire to upgrade their positions into management levels because they themselves struggled to get into those positions, so should they. This treatment is however contrary to their male employees. On the other hand, another respondent has this to say;

*Being a queen bee has helped me achieve my career objectives, my team brings quick results, works faster and accurately...being an authoritative leader has helped me maintain my position throughout these years
I like to be at the top...and being in management has accorded me the opportunity to help me to assist another women to get promoted or advance their careers...but you must be good at what you do to be promoted and stay there.*

Even though some queen bees could not assist other women to rise in their careers, the findings above reveal that some queen bees believe that it is their purpose to uplift other women when they are at the top but with one condition of being a hard worker. These findings validate Derks et al., (2011) who opine that, women may not support other women if there is an issue with these other women's qualifications or competencies because they do not want to be associated with things that may fuel the negative stereotypes.



4.3 Discrimination

The interviewees revealed that acts of gender discrimination exist in the banking workplace. Women are discriminated against during promotion, recruitment, employment and remuneration and it is done silently. The results also show that not regarding the sex they are up against, women are competitive. As a result, women do not like it when they compete against other women they become ruthless and sidelines other women for reasons best known to themselves. Dobson and Iredale (2006) echoes these findings and reiterate that if the time comes to assess candidates for promotion, women leaders do not assess female candidates as they regard them as less qualified and competent than men hence reducing their promotion prospects. This is in line with Scott (1994) in Anku-Tsedde and Gadegebeku (2014) who states that discrimination is probable when women are regarded as least acceptable candidates for high level jobs. The Labour Act 28:01 Section 5(e) even provides for the protection of any employee against discrimination in the form of recruitment, promotion or choice of job posts nevertheless the Queen Bees in the banking sector have found ways to circumvent this law to sustain their positions. Renunciation of discrimination results in anxiety, loss of self-confidence and insecurity in rejected subordinates even though their rebuff was a result of biased treatment (Barreto et al., 2010)

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study concludes that the Queen Bees in the Zimbabwean banking sector are reluctant to promote other women even though naturally it is expected that women leaders should empower and inspire their women subordinates for them to realise the same. Women in leadership positions do not want to catapult other women into management positions such that they end up distancing themselves from other women by discriminating them from deserving promotions, they have a tendency of exhibiting autocratic leadership style towards other women than the males, as well as that they fear competition from their female subordinates as some fear being surpassed in performance and some want to remove competition and any type of value threats from them. Queen bees also frustrates their subordinates by making unrealistic targets and work demands. It should be noted that Queen Bees regard male subordinates as hardworking and committed to their jobs hence they prefer to promote or empower male employees to female employees. Women in leadership positions have no choice but to end up in compliance to the male culture that dominate the workplace by assuming the male style of leadership. Queen Bees regard their gender as a hindrance hence they force themselves to lead the way men do as it is regarded as a norm. The Queen Bees are viewed as matching the men in leadership positions, on the other hand they are seen as traitors to other women and by other women in the banking sector organisations. However, the study found out that some of the junior women are not promotable as they lack the right attitude and they are content with positions that do not have responsibilities and also they do not possess the right qualifications for such career advancement.

The study recommends future researches in strategies to address negative Queen Bees effects in organisations so that the career advancement of junior women in the banking sector is not hampered.

Funding: "This research received no external funding"

Conflicts of Interest: There is no conflict of interest.

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