

Workplace Discrimination and the Career Advancement of Female Employees in Smile Communications Nigeria Limited

Fakiya Precious Funmilayo, Eguonor Jennifer Oleabhielle

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Faculty of Social and Management Science, Benson Idahosa University, Benin City, Nigeria.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2025.120500160>

Received: 10 May 2024; Accepted: 14 May 2025; Published: 18 June 2025

ABSTRACT

Despite global awareness of workplace discrimination against women, its specific manifestations and impacts in different organizational settings remain underexplored. This study investigates the effects of workplace discrimination on the career advancement of female employees in Smile Communications Nigeria Limited. The Theoretical framework is based on the Glass Ceiling Theory and the Social Learning Theory. Employing a descriptive survey research design, the study sampled 136 female employees from its Ikeja and Benin City Branches using a purposive sampling technique. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and analyzed using statistical tools, including chi-square tests. The findings revealed significant barriers to career progression for women, including biased organizational practices, unequal opportunities, and a lack of supportive policies. These hinder individual career growths and negatively impact organizational productivity and culture. The study recommends the need for interventions and policy reforms to promote gender equality and enhance career advancement opportunities for women at Smile Communications Nigeria Limited.

Keywords: Workplace discrimination, career advancement, gender inequality, glass ceiling theory, organizational practices.

INTRODUCTION

Discrimination against women manifests in unequal pay, limited access to education and career opportunities, gender-based violence, and restrictive societal norms, addressing gender discrimination is crucial, as equal rights and opportunities are both statutory and universally accepted human rights (Thio, 2020). However, despite their participation in the workforce, they still face discrimination, particularly in career advancements. In Nigeria, the ideology and influence of cultural norms that confine women to domestic roles sometimes dictate workplace practices and the way women are perceived by their male counterparts. A point in case, was the discriminatory statement made by Mr. Mohamadu Buhari (the former President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria) when he remarked that “*Aisha’s (his wife) place was in the Kitchen*”. This was no doubt a derogatory statement without recourse to her political office as the First Lady of Nigeria, further implying his preconceived notion of the placement of women in Nigeria. Entrenched in this statement is the ideology of patriarchy, culturally prescribed gender roles, and the stereotypes, which shaped the sexual division of labour among the sexes as evident in most traditional work settings and even modern workplaces. This sexual division of labour breeds ground for inequality which leads to unequal placements of the sexes further resulting in unequal earning power and statuses. This ideology is like the root cause or the faulty foundation that creates room for other discriminatory practices in the workplace. Such ideology could engender negative perceptions with domineering or controlling attitudes, and tendencies such as the exclusion of female employees by their male counterparts from decision-making activities and processes within the organization. Such discriminatory practices within an organization limit women’s professional growth (Ihechu, Afulike, & Ndukwe, 2023).

In contemporary society, many organizations impose additional requirements on female employees, with some organizations reluctant to hire women during recruitment. According to the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Discrepancy Report (2022), women earn only 77 cents for every dollar earned by men globally, reflecting a 23% gender pay difference. Addressing this inequity requires workplace policies that rectifies pay imbalances.

Moreover, mental health issues arising from workplace discrimination significantly affect women's well-being and job-satisfaction. Experiencing bias or unfair treatment leads to loneliness, self-doubt, imposter syndrome, conflicting priorities and anxiety (Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi, 2023; Maitra, 2023). Additionally, women frequently lack access to mentorship and sponsorship within male-dominated networks, limiting their professional advancements. For women who have been laid off, discrimination makes finding new employment even more difficult (Wang and Zhang, 2018; Singh, 2023). Hence, this study investigated the relationship between workplace discrimination and the career advancement of female employees in Smile Communications Nigeria Limited.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Perspective of Discrimination Against Women

Research has shown that from time immemorial women have faced widespread discrimination participating as a citizen of a nation and have been exposed to occupational segregation, despite the ongoing discrimination challenges and progress in achieving gender equality in employment. Uneven power relations between men and women define a patriarchal system that has persisted throughout history. Ekpenyong, Ebinyi and Ushie, (2017) observed that in Nigeria and other traditional societies, the system of patriarchy gives a husband "the right to the body of his wife" after marriage, and married women's lives were frequently likened to a kind of slavery. This is also expressed as "*Feme covert*," which means a "*Covered woman*", that is when women's economic standing and legal rights were their husbands' to keep. They were also forbidden from holding personal property. It was not until 1882 when married women gained the right to own property, but everything, even the children's custody and household goods, were rights vested in the husband. It was illegal for women to exist independently of their husbands and for them to file or defend judicial actions. In general, women's rights were far less than those of men.

Throughout history, discrimination against women has progressed through several stages and continues to this day. Speaking up against the male-dominated culture was necessary during a time when women were not considered individuals and had no role in political fields. But the women's rights movement, with its focus on family reform, was founded by those early pioneers who were willing to take risks. Women are often oppressed and disadvantaged in such societies (Offiong, Eyo and Offiong, 2021). Additionally, Obiora and Onwuyi (2018) observed that men held positions of authority and were more likely to be in positions of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and property control. It was observed in the political domain that a considerable number of women did not obtain the right to vote until the 20th century, in the industry, the bulk of them continued to work in traditionally feminine fields like domestic service, teaching, and nursing despite the fact that the number of employed women was increasing (Neely, Sheehan, and Williams, 2023). The occupation of women was frequently low-wage employment with unfavorable working conditions (Hunt and Nichol, 2022).

During World War One, the demand for essential goods and services increased significantly. This led to a greater need for workers, and as a result, many women entered the workforce to fill these positions. The war created opportunities for women to take on roles traditionally held by men, such as in manufacturing, transportation, and other essential industries. This shift in the labor force marked a significant turning point for women's participation in the workforce. With this, it could be said that women have persistently struggled for acceptance, honor, acknowledgment as human beings, and unique treatment.

Workplace Discrimination and Female Career Advancement

Women are more likely than men to be unemployed and participate less in the labour force, with only six women employed for every ten men (ILO, 2020). Female unemployment rates are still twice as large as men's, with prevailing social norms continuing to obstruct women's participation in paid employment. This is because, culture favours male output over female productivity, promoting masculinity as a means of success (Oluwagbemi-Jacob and Uduma, 2015). Khuzwayo (2016) found that patriarchy influences the type of professions that men and women can pursue in the workplace, as leadership roles are often assigned to men while caregiving and administrative roles are associated with women. Factors such as individual beliefs, corporate cultures, and patriarchal traditions contribute to discrimination against women who receive less social

recognition and are not acknowledged or rewarded for their qualities (BrightHR, 2019). Gender discrimination also limits women's advancement in organizational leadership (Ziviani, 2021). This restricts career options and perpetuates workplace inequalities as many female employees hesitate to compete with male colleagues and prefer to remain in their current roles rather than seek career advancements (QI, Min, and Bo, 2016).

However, despite notable female progress over the past 20 years in the workplace, data clearly shows persistent inequalities between women and men on access to the labour market, unemployment and conditions at work as most women still face discrimination. The "glass ceiling" theory shed light on the invisible barriers preventing women from reaching senior leadership roles due to discriminatory practices and biases (Mention, 2022). In China, women struggle to balance work and home life, often prioritizing family over career and undervaluing themselves in the workplace (Wang and Zhang, 2018). In Nigeria, the difficulties women experience in the workplace stem from not only their underrepresentation but also gender bias. These gender biases can take many different forms, such as social expectations, unintentional presumptions about what makes a good leader, or barriers that prevent women from accessing mentorship opportunities. This can also manifest through organizational practices such as organizational recruitment and hiring practice or even entrenched in its organizational culture.

The Financial Times Stock Exchange list of 100 UK CEOs in 2018 revealed that fewer than 7% were female, with only seven women in CEO roles (Statista, 2019). This illustrates how gender inequality hinders career progression, reinforcing the concept of the glass ceiling (Maitra, 2023). Sexism is another major factor in workplace discrimination, contributing to the glass ceiling and slow advancement of women in international organizations (Cope, 2016; Babic and Hansez, 2021). Women often face restrictive standards related to age, height and attractiveness that are unrelated to job performance. Many firms hesitate to hire women, limiting their career growth (Li and liang, 2016). Discriminatory policies result in long work hours, unequal workloads, and biased promotion processes, making it difficult for women to earn a living wage (Adel and Alqatan, 2019)

Empirical Review

Liwei Chen's (2018) peace and development work master thesis on the impact of gender discrimination on the workplace highlights gender inequalities in China over the past decade. Through interviews with male and female employees, the study found that women were more likely to report experiencing gender discrimination, negatively affecting their career development (Maitra, 2023). Findings indicates that women are not provided with fair and equal opportunities, such as training and promotions, compared to men. This gender inequality impacts employee morale, loyalty, and job satisfaction. In conclusion gender discrimination significantly contributes to workplace inequality in China. Koch, D'Mello, and Sackett, (2015) found that 37.5% of female administrators were overlooked for promotions in favour of men, with a combination of age, gender, and race making advancement difficult. Additionally, 50% of participants faced childcare challenges, 37.5% encountered family leave difficulties, and 25.0% experienced discrimination related to pregnancy or having a child.

Balabantaray's (2023) work, *Breaking the glass ceiling: Analyzing gender stereotypes and bias in contemporary work environments*, revealed that women earn significantly lower salaries than men. Abdul, and Aamer's (2011) research on gender discrimination & its effect on employee performance/productivity, found that gender discrimination significantly impacts female employee performance. The findings revealed that recruitment policies, salary gaps, and career misalignment hinder the performance of female academic staff in Lagos State universities. Institutions favours males for managerial positions due to their perceived social and leadership skills, demonstrating that female employees face discriminatory practices that impede career growth (Gberevbie, 2014). However, some research disagrees that women face discrimination in all aspects of work but rather experience it in career advancement (Ketchiwou and Dzansi, 2023)

THEORETICAL REVIEW

The glass ceiling theory

The glass ceiling theory, first introduced by Loden in 1978, serves as an essential framework for analyzing the subtle yet persistent barriers that prevents women from reaching leadership positions despite possessing the

necessary qualifications and skills. These invisible obstacles stem from deep-rooted gender bias and manifest in various forms, including discriminatory policies and practices that restricts women’s access to promotions, mentorship, and high-level opportunities. The case of Smile Communications exemplifies this theory, as the noticeable absence of women in leadership roles suggests the presence of a “glass ceiling” that hinders their career progression. This situation not only limits women’s professional growth but also deprives organizations of diverse perspectives and innovative ideas that come from inclusive leadership. Addressing these barriers is crucial to fostering a fair workplace where all employees, regardless of gender, have equal opportunities to succeed.

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory, developed by Albert Bandura in 1977, explains how discriminatory behaviours can be reinforced within organizations. This theory posits that individuals learn by observing and imitating others, particularly those in positions of influence. In the workplace, employees may internalize and replicate sexist behaviours when they see leaders and the colleagues consistently favouring male employees or disregarding the contributions of female team members. This sends a strong message that gender bias is acceptable, leading to an environment where discriminatory practices become normalized. This normalization not only affects daily workplace interaction but also has lasting effects on women’s career advancements and the overall organizational culture. In the case of smile communications Nigeria Ltd, if leadership openly displays gender bias-whether by giving preferential treatments to male employees, dismissing female input or failing to promote qualified women—this behaviour can be mirrored by staff members. Employees take behavioural cues from their leaders.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study utilized the survey research design to examine workplace discrimination and career advancement in Smile Communication Nigeria Limited with branches in Ikeja, and in Benin City. The population of this study is made up of both male and female employees in smile communication Nigeria Ltd, branches in Ikeja and Benin city. The study’s population comprised employees of smile communication Nigeria Ltd, in both its Ikeja (118) and Benin city (50) branches (Human Resource Department, 2024). Yamane’s formulae was adopted to derive a sample size 136 employees. The sampling technique for this study was a non-probability sampling called “purposive sampling”. In the course of this study, the primary source of data collection was through the use of online questionnaire (google form), while secondary sources of data collection included the use of journals, textbooks, articles, and the internet. Section A of the online questionnaire sought to elicit demographic characteristics of respondents such as age group, marital status, religion, employment status, academic qualification. Section B contains questions sought to gain respondents opinions on possible discriminatory act and its likely effect on their career advancements. The chi-square (X^2) Statistical test was adopted in this study.

Research Hypothesis:

Workplace discrimination has a significant effect on women’s career advancement in Smile Communications Nigeria Limited.

Table 1: Calculation Table for Research Hypothesis

Question: Were women in the firm passed over for a promotion or job opportunity that they are qualified for?

Options	Fo	Fe	F0-Fe	$(Fo-Fe)^2$	$\frac{(Fo-Fe)^2}{Fe}$
Yes	18	68	-50	2500	36.76
No	118	68	50	2500	36.76
Total	136	Calculated chi-square X^2			73.52

Source: Field Study 2024

Decision Rule: Since the calculated chi-square value is greater than the critical table/value (i.e.) $73.52 > 3.841$, we reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis. This means that there is sufficient evidence to conclude that there is a significant existence of discrimination faced by women in Smile Communications Nigeria Ltd, Ikeja branch and Benin City.

Table 2: Calculation Table for Research Hypothesis

Question: Do employees at Smile Communications feel they have a good understanding of the company's policies on gender equality?

Options	Fo	Fe	F0-Fe	$(Fo-Fe)^2$	$\frac{(Fo-Fe)^2}{Fe}$
Yes	85	68	17	289	4.25
No	51	68	-17	289	4.25
Total	136	Calculated chi-square X^2			8.5

Source: Field Study 2024

Decision Rule: Since the calculated chi-square value is greater than the critical table/value (i.e.) $8.5 > 3.841$, we reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis. This means that there is sufficient evidence to conclude that Organizational practices in Smile Communications Nigeria Ltd, significantly promote discrimination against its female employees.

Table 3: Calculation Table for Research Hypothesis

Question: Smile Communications has an unbiased criterion for the promotion of employees.

Options	Fo	Fe	F0-Fe	$(Fo-Fe)^2$	$\frac{(Fo-Fe)^2}{Fe}$
Strongly agree	21	27.2	-6.2	38.44	1.41
Agree	60	27.2	32.8	1075.84	39.55
Undecided	13	27.2	-14.2	201.64	7.41
Strongly disagree	22	27.2	-5.2	27.04	0.99
Disagree	20	27.2	-7.2	51.84	1.91
Total	136	Calculated chi-square X^2			51.27

Source: Field Study 2024

Decision Rule: Since the calculated chi-square value is greater than the critical table/value (i.e.) $51.27 > 9.488$, we reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis. This means that Smile Communications Nigeria Ltd has successful tactics in establishing a more equitable workplace for its female employees.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study on gender discrimination and career advancement at Smile Communications Nigeria Ltd. highlights key insights into workplace dynamics and gender equality. The majority of respondents were young (65% aged 18-27), Christian (59%), and single (68%), with many women holding bachelor's degrees (44%). However, their

career progression did not reflect their educational qualifications. Nearly half (46%) of respondents had been with the company for 2-3 years, while only 5% had stayed beyond eight years, suggesting limited long-term career prospects, especially for women. A significant number occupied entry-level positions, with few advancing into leadership roles, indicating barriers to career progression.

Gender-based discrimination was reported by 28% of women, with 13% believing that qualified women were overlooked for promotions. Additionally, 10% of respondents witnessed cases where women were paid less than men for similar roles. While these issues were not reported as widespread, they indicate underlying inequalities. Employee comfort in reporting discrimination was also examined, with 35% expressing discomfort in reporting such issues, suggesting doubts about the effectiveness of the system. Additionally, 38% lacked awareness of the company's gender equality policies, which could hinder efforts to foster inclusivity. Regarding mentorship programs, 38% found them beneficial, while an equal proportion disagreed, suggesting inconsistencies in accessibility or effectiveness. Similarly, 59% believed the company had unbiased promotion criteria, but 31% disagreed, highlighting concerns about merit-based advancements. Overall, the study highlights areas for improvement at Smile Communications, emphasizing the need for transparent policies, effective mentorship, and equal opportunities to create a fairer workplace for all employees.

CONCLUSION

The study on gender discrimination at Smile Communications Nigeria Limited, highlights significant challenges female employees face in career advancement. Women encounter substantial barriers in climbing the corporate ladder, with fewer leadership opportunities. Female employees perceive a clear disparity in opportunities compared to male colleagues, experiencing microaggressions and inadequate managerial support. As a result, motivation, engagement, and retention of talented female employees decrease. Creating a supportive workplace culture that discourages discrimination and promotes diversity is essential.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study highlights the impact of gender discrimination on women's career advancement at Smile Communications Nigeria Limited and recommends that key stakeholders such as the government, organizational management, and anti-discrimination agencies implement strategic interventions. Specifically, the government should enact and enforce workplace equality laws, establish monitoring agencies, and collaborate with media and civil society to raise awareness. For Organizations such as Smile Communications Nigeria Limited, implementing transparent merit-based criteria for promotions and pay raises, along with mentorship programs for women, can help ensure fair opportunities for female employees. Also, conducting regular workshops on gender sensitivity and unconscious bias is essential, alongside reviewing policies to ensure diversity and inclusion. Establishing a zero-tolerance policy for discrimination with clear reporting mechanisms can help create an equitable work environment. Moreso, Agencies addressing discrimination must develop resources on best practices, conduct compliance audits, and train HR and leadership teams on addressing discrimination. Collaborating with organizations through awareness campaigns and workshops can further promote gender equality. By adopting these targeted actions, stakeholders can create a fair and inclusive work culture at Smile Communications Nigeria Ltd. and beyond.

REFERENCE

1. Abdul, H. And Aamer W. (2011). Gender Discrimination & Its Effect on Employee Performance/Productivity. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 1(15), 170-176.
2. Adel, R., & Alqatan, A. (2019). Gender Employment Discrimination: A Comparison Between The Banking Sectors of Kuwait and The United Kingdom. *Corporate Board: Role, Duties & Composition*, 15(3), 43-57.
3. Babic A., Hansez, I. (2021). The Glass Ceiling for Women Managers: Antecedents and Consequences for Work-Family Interface and Well-Being at Work. *Front. Psychol.* 12:618250. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.618250
4. Balabantaray, S. R (2023). Breaking the glass ceiling: Analyzing gender stereotypes and bias in contemporary work environments. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Comprehensive*

- Research, 2(5), 1-9.
5. Batool, F. (2020). Gender Discrimination at Workplace and Mental Health of Women: A Systematic Literature Review-- Palarch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology 17(8), 622-633. ISSN 1567-214x
6. BrightHR. (2019). Gender Inequality in the Workplace | BrightHR. Available at: <https://www.brighthr.com/articles/equality-anddiscrimination/gender-equality>
7. Cope, J. J. (2016). Culture, Sexism, and Legal Remedies: A Three Country Study of Gender Inequality at the Corporate Level (Doctoral dissertation).
8. Ekpenyong, V. O., Ebinyi, D. W., & Ushie, G. B. (2017). Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women for Sustainable Development in Nigeria. Education for Today: Journal of Faculty of Education, 13(3), 10-17.
9. Galsanjigmed, E., Sekiguchi T. (2023) Challenges Women Experience in Leadership Careers: An Integrative Review. 3(2):366-389. <https://doi.org/10.3390/merits3020021>
10. Gbervbie, D. E., (2014). An Empirical Study of Gender Discrimination and Employee Performance among Academic Staff of Government Universities in Lagos State, Nigeria. 8(1). 101-108.
11. Hunt, H., Nichol, G. (2022). Women and Low-Wage Work. We Set People Up For Impossible Decisions.
12. Ihechu, I.P, Afulike D.C, Ndukwe U.E (2023). Cultural Practices against Women In Nigeria: The Media Frame and the Challenges. International Journal of Current Sciences Research and Review. 6(4), 2335-2346.
13. International Labour Organization (2018) Women still less likely to be active in the labour market than men in most of the world. <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/ilo-women-still-less-likely-be-active-labour-market-men-most-world>
14. Ketchiwou G. F., Dzansi L.W. (2023). Examining the Impact of Gender Discriminatory Practices on Women's Development and Progression at Work. Businesses. 3(2):347-367. <https://doi.org/10.3390/businesses3020022>
15. Khuzwayo, Z. (2016). Separate space: An approach to addressing gender inequality in the workplace. Journal of International Women's Studies, 17(4), 91-101.
16. Koch, A. J., D'Mello, S. D., & Sackett, P. R. (2015). A meta-analysis of gender stereotypes and bias in experimental simulations of employment decision making. Journal of Applied Psychology, 100(1), 128-161.
17. Maitra, M. (2023). The impact of emotional and mental health on women's career. Together Thrive Foundation.
18. Neely, M. T., Sheehan, P., & Williams, C. L. (2023). Social inequality in high tech: How gender, race, and ethnicity structure the world's most powerful industry. Annual Review of Sociology, 49(1), 319-338. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-031021-034202>
19. Oluwagbemi-Jacob, D., & Uduma, C. E. (2015). Gender equality, gender inequality, and gender complementarity: insights from igbo traditional culture. Philosophy research: English version, 005(005), 223-232.
20. Obiora, C. A., & Onwuyi, U. M. (2018). Contending and Conceptual Issues in Politics of Gender in Contemporary Gender Issues. Emeka Obi et al (eds), Onitsha: Abbot Com Ltd.
21. Offiong, E.E, Eyo, E.I, Offiong, A.E (2021). Patriarchy, Culture and the Social Development of Women in Nigeria. Pinisi Journal of Art, Humanity and Social Studies. 1(4), 2747-2671.
22. Qi, W., Min, D., & Bo. A. (2016). Revisiting gender inequality: perspectives from the People's Republic of China. New York: Palgrave Macmillan
23. Siddique, H. (2018). Workplace gender discrimination remains rife, survey finds. [online] The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/13/workplace-genderdiscrimination-remains-rife-survey-finds>.
24. Singh, S. (2023). Bringing Women Back to Work in the Post Pandemic World. International Journal for Multidisciplinary Reserch. 6(3). 2582-2160.
25. Statista. (2019). Female held CEO positions in FTSE companies 2018 | UK statistic. [Online] Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/685208/number-of-female-ceopositions-in-ftse-companies-uk/>
26. Thio, L (2020). Equality and Non-Discrimination in International Human Rights Law. Special

Report.

27. Wang, Y., & Zhang, C. (2018). Gender Inequalities in Labor Market Outcomes of Informal Caregivers near Retirement Age in Urban China. *Feminist Economics*, 24(2), 147-170.
28. WHO (2018). | Women's mental health. [Online] Available at: https://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/genderwomen/en/
29. World Economic Forum (2022): Global Gender Discrepancy Report 2022
30. Ziviani, M. (2021). Gender Inequality in the Workplace: The lack of Women in upper Management Position. <https://diposit.ub.edu/dspace/bitstream/2445/180476/1/TFG-EI-Ziviani-Miriam-jun21.pdf>