

**BREAKING THROUGH THE GLASS CEILING: THE
ROLE OF SPONSORSHIP IN ADVANCING WOMEN TO
SENIOR MANAGEMENT IN PUBLICLY LISTED BANKS**

BY

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ABSTRACT

Across the world, there is increasing acceptance that inclusion of women in strategic decision-making positions is important if companies are to increase productivity. In Kenya, the number of women graduating from universities over the last 15 years has increased tremendously. This has translated to an increase in the number of women entering the labour market with experience levels equal to that of men. Consequently, it was expected that the ambitious ones would eventually move into the executive suite at the same pace as men. However, something went amiss.

Although corporations claim to be institutions in which advancement up the corporate ladder is based on performance and skill, the reality is that despite men and women's similar educational attainment, ambition and commitment to their careers, men generally progress faster and attain higher-status positions compared to women. In an attempt to reverse the trend, women have actively sought mentors and sponsors just as men but have still failed to break through the glass ceiling at the same rate as men (Carter & Silva, 2010). According to Carter & Silva, (2010) this gap could be explained by the concept of sponsorship in which women are under sponsored relative to their male peers. This study therefore sought to focus on women in senior management in listed banks at the Nairobi Securities Exchange (NSE) to substantiate the role played by sponsorship in their advancement to key decision-making positions

A two-stage qualitative approach was employed for this study. The first step involved interviews with key informants who were women retired from senior positions in listed banks and persons who had served in boards of listed banks. The second stage involved interviewing all identified women in the top two tiers of key decision making positions in listed banks. There after purposive sampling was used to select three cases that underwent in-depth case study to clearly establish the role of sponsorship in their career advancement.

A variety of data sources were used for this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face with the senior women in management and people whom the women in senior management are well known to. Secondary data from professional membership associations such as the Kenya Bankers Association was also reviewed. The data was then triangulated to increase validity of the findings.

The data collected was then categorised according to identifiable themes and patterns. Ideas and concepts providing descriptive labels for each category were then coded for analysis, examining relationships between them and comparing them with pre-existing literature and theory.

The major findings were that sponsorship is key to the advancement of women. Women, besides delivering sterling performance need sponsors to advocate for them and make their achievements visible in high-level meetings, which they are not privy to. Having a sponsor also proved invaluable in enabling women to take up daring roles and risks as someone provided cover in the event something went wrong.

The findings of this study will contribute to a wider appreciation of the concept of sponsorship in increasing the representation of women in key decision-making positions. It will also serve to illuminate the path of women in middle management looking at breaking through the glass ceiling.