

Women In The Limelight: Strides And Paradigm Shifts

Safiya Ibn Garba
Empowering Women for Excellence Initiative
23A Dan Buran Road, 80000001,
Kaduna, Nigeria
sig@eweing.org

ABSTRACT

What has been influencing the recognition of recent strides by women? Could it be a redefinition of success formerly dictated by social norms and narratives? Or could it be that women are being given “permission” and space to realise their potential? Aside from the regression from recent progress in recent years made due to the novel pandemic, it is time to reflect on the paradigm shift taking place and why it is happening. Why suddenly does it seem women are making the headlines?

A 2021 study by the Centre for Economic Policy Research and the World Economic Forum, surfaces that “countries led by women had systematically and significantly better Covid-19 outcomes, on average than those led by men. It further suggests that the difference may be explained by the proactive and coordinated policy responses adopted by female leaders.” A relevant place to start our reflections.

Let’s look both inward and outward to determine and promote the factors that are bringing us closer to achieving sustainable development and achievement goals for women around the world.

This paper will help us better examine the factors driving these notable shifts, so we craft an ongoing working knowledge base that promotes continuous innovation, illumination, and integration of women multi-sectorally and globally.

KEYWORDS: paradigm, women, recognition

1 INTRODUCTION

What has been influencing recent visible strides by women? This begs even more questions. One of which is whether only now women have been making strides or have they simply never been visible enough for the world to see?

Coleman 2020, highlights that since 1969, women's achievements include space travel, musical exploits, and significant impact on political and judicial systems. [1]

Well before that, in many cultures, female heroes, warriors and disrupters have governed empires and made lasting impact on their societies. These include Queen Amina of Zazzau (Nigeria), Queen Boudicca of Iceni (Ancient Britain), Joan of Arc (France), Susan B. Anthony (United States), Rosa Parks (United States) and Harriet Tubman (United States) to mention a few. [2]

Aside from individual women who have stood out in the past, a number of matriarchal societies have existed, some of which are still thriving today. For example, in China, the Mosuo women are the last surviving matriarchy in the country; the indigenous BriBri tribe of Costa Rica where women are so revered, they are the only ones who can prepare the sacred cacao drink for their religious rituals; the Umoja tribe of Kenya founded in 1990, hosts only women within its physical borders and was formed to accommodate survivors of sexual or gender-based violence.

More examples include the Minangkabau people of Indonesia who are a part of the largest surviving matriarchal society; in Ghana within the Akan Matrilineal, men also hold leadership positions; and in the Khasi tribe of India of approximately one million strong in 2011, the women's surnames are passed down instead that of their husbands. [3]

Want to explore a few more recent examples?

Kamala Harris was sworn in as the First Female Vice President of the United States of America in 2021; Amanda Gorman became the youngest inaugural poet in the United States in 2021 and the nation's first Youth Poet Laureate. American Gitanjali Rao, a 15-year-old scientist and inventor was named TIME's first Kid of the Year in December 2020. For the first time in the history of the Golden Globe Awards, three women were nominated in the Best Director category: Chloé Zhao, Emerald Fennell and Regina King with 28-year-old Chloe becoming the first Asian woman to win the accolade.

“NASA astronaut Christina Koch, returned to Earth on Feb. 6, 2020, after spending 328 days aboard the International Space Station. Her trip surpassed the previous record held by Peggy Whitson for the longest single spaceflight by a woman.”

What about governance? Jacinda Ardern is the youngest female prime minister of New Zealand since 1856 and has gracefully and decisively handled a number of significant incidents in her country including the New Zealand Mosque bombings in Christchurch in 2019 and strict COVID-19 measures to contain the novel pandemic. We can certainly speak of more exemplary women leaders who have and are making women proud through their exceptional leadership. [4]

So again, why is there a paradigm shift suddenly that seeks to highlight the achievements of women? Could it be a redefinition of success formerly dictated by social norms and narratives that were only attributed to men? Could it be because their achievements can no longer be “hidden” or seen as unusual? Or could it be that more women are being given “permission” and space to realise their potential? I dislike the term “permission” in this context, but could this be a valid contributing factor?

Questions, questions.

We have now seen from history that it is safe to say that women have been making giant strides for centuries and in our modern world, thanks to technology, it is much easier to see and hear of these achievements. Therefore, the co-called paradigm shift may be influenced by a number of factors which we will attempt to look a little closer at in the following section.

2 DIGGING DEEPER – THE PARADIGM SHIFT

Lombrozo (2016) defines a paradigm as “an important change that happens when the usual way of thinking about or doing something is replaced by a new and different way.” [5]

I dare to define the paradigm shift here as people are now beginning to recognise the capacity and agency of women, as opposed to the previous way of thinking that when women achieved anything, it was exceptional or out of the ordinary. This speaks a lot about how women are perceived and has led to several real and limiting concepts including the “glass ceiling” and the “imposter syndrome.” These concepts have been in operation such that women are either deliberately blocked from opportunities for growth and leadership or make women feel guilty and undeserving about the things they have achieved from their own hard work and grit.

Why do we now “think women are capable?”

Alice Eagly, a social psychologist at Northwestern University in Illinois led a study that that examined Americans’ perceptions of women over the past 70 years.

Eagly and her co-authors analysed 16 public opinion polls spanning from 1946 to 2018 to see how gender stereotypes have evolved over time. They looked at three clusters of personality traits: competence, communion and agency and competence traits of being organised, intelligent and capable amongst other variables. The study’s most interesting finding was Americans now think women are just as smart and just as competent as men. Take note of the word “now.”

Reasons for this shift in perception included the fact that as more women joined the workforce in the last 20th century, Americans were better able to see them in roles that require organisation, intelligence and ability. Women now earn more bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral degrees than men; and in 2018, 75% of respondents thought women had better people skills and were more compassionate and kinder than men, a significant shift from the 50% of respondents in the 1940s. [6]

Interesting findings. It seems positive stereotypes have played a role in the above-mentioned study. Let’s look at some more.

“In the 27 member countries of the EU, in April 2013 women accounted for only 16.6% of board members of large publicly listed companies. This went up by 5% since October 2010, when the European Commission announced that it was considering “targeted initiatives to get more women into decision-making positions.” [7]

Aha! targeted initiatives, we are getting somewhere.

The Harvard Business Review asked this question: Why women remain so dramatically underrepresented in the workforce and particularly in leadership? An unfortunate but inevitable “truth”—that goes something like this was the answer of some respondents: “High-level jobs require extremely long hours, women’s devotion to family makes it impossible for them to put in those hours, and their careers suffer as a result.” They call this explanation the work/family narrative. In a 2012 survey of more than 6,500 Harvard Business School alumni

from many different industries, 73% of men and 85% of women invoked it to explain women's stalled advancement. Believing this explanation doesn't mean it's true, however, and their research called it seriously into question. [8]

The research actually unearthed the gender dimensions of the work/family narrative and actually showed that men were also being negatively affected and did not feel fulfilment or balance in their work/family life. It showed that while for women, the stereotypes and gender norms of them being on the frontline of parenting does affect their ability to invest more effort into work and professional growth, in addition the narrative does affect both women and men. So here we have interesting observations about how the work/family narrative also affects men.

The UN Women and UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs extremely informative and creative: Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2021 shares insights on gender equality across all 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

It paints a grim picture of the effect of the novel pandemic which is an overall regression on areas of significant progress before COVID-19. The report is full of disappointing statistics showing just how extensively damaging the pandemic has been to the cause of women's rights around the world.

On SDG one on no poverty, "progress in eliminating extreme poverty has reversed while holes in the social protection floor leave women even more vulnerable."

SDG two on zero hunger, "the global gender gap in food security has risen dramatically during the pandemic, with more women and girls going hungry."

SDG three on good health and wellbeing, "disruptions in essential health services due to COVID-19 are taking a tragic toll on women and girls."

SDG four on quality education, "school closures spell lost opportunities for girls and an increased risk of violence, exploitation and early marriage."

And SDG on gender equality, "Women, on the front lines of the pandemic response, have been given a back seat in shaping the recovery."

The report also highlights "where women have been in leadership positions, the response to the pandemic has often been faster and more attuned to social needs, but at all levels and across sectors, women do not have the same space in decision-making as men. Globally, women comprise over 75 per cent of the health workforce, making them indispensable to the COVID-19 response. Yet they make up only 28 per cent of health executives. While women's organisations are at the forefront of community responses to COVID-19 in many countries, they struggle with diminishing funding and shrinking civic space." [9]

The report makes for a fascinating read. But more than that, it might seem to be countering the argument of this paper; on the contrary, it shows that there is much more awareness and importance given to the subject - which in my view is again indicative of the shift. Ask yourself, 100 years ago, who cared about all these and invested resources of all kinds into such work? Your answer will be informative.

It is in our faces now, where it should be.

There are so many reasons we can postulate have been of a great contribution to the paradigm shift. This includes change of mindsets of girls and women themselves, technology, representation and deliberate “positive discrimination” otherwise known as affirmative action intended to create spaces and places for marginalised groups.

3 CONCLUSION

So, what does this paper advance?

It proposes from the deep dive and tonnes of literature and research available; the paradigm shift has been influenced by several factors including:

- The rise and dynamism of technology that has made for information to be more easily accessible to consumers around the globe.
- The era of globalisation has enabled more international co-operation and visibility, thereby bringing to light stories and creating opportunities for collaborations that would have seemed impossible years back.
- Targeted initiatives and affirmative action deliberately meant to create spaces for girls and women who would ordinarily not have such opportunities, giving them a chance to shine.
- Representation matters. The shifting of mindsets of girls and women themselves who can now see role models like them; and emulate them.
- The change of perceptions of societies about the agency and competence of women thereby providing opportunities for them to be entrusted with positions of authority that have proven to be of extreme benefit to entities and nation states.
- The multiple resources being invested into the education of girls and women thereby equipping them with skills to enter and conquer various sectors.
- The shattering of the glass ceiling and walls by progressive women and men who recognise that no one can show their potential if they are not given the opportunity to do so.
- The role of mentoring by both women and men in positions of leadership and influence which directly contributes to the confidence and competence of their mentees.

The above list is not exhaustive by any means and what we like to see is not only for the positive paradigm shift(s) to remain, but for the eventual desired outcome of the cause for women’s rights: recognition, and equality for all.

Finally, by normalising women's achievements, we contribute greatly to future generation's way of thinking. We have the opportunity to do things right and now is the time to support the shift and make it permanent.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST: The author declares no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

- [1] Coleman K. “[Amazing Achievements by Women Every Year for the Last 50 Years](#)”, BestLife. 2020
- [2] Kuiper K. “[7 Women Warriors](#)”, Britannica.
- [3] Madus S. “[6 Matriarchal Societies That Have Been Thriving With Women at the Helm for Centuries](#)”, Town and Country 2019.
- [4] Wurzburger A. “[15 Times Women Made History in the Past Year](#)”, People 2021.
- [5] Lombrozo T. “[What Is A Paradigm Shift, Anyway?](#)”, NPR 2016.
- [6] Netburn D. “[It’s Official: Majority of Americans think Women are just as Competent as Men, if not More So](#)”, Los Angeles Times 2019.
- [7] Van der Gaag. “[Women are better off today, but still far from being Equal with Men](#)”, The Guardian 2014.
- [8] Ely R. J, Padavic I. “[What’s Really Holding Women Back?](#)”, Harvard Business Review 2020.
- [9] UN Women, UNDESA. “[Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2021.](#)”