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Women of African origin and career advancement in the UK: a case study
Conference paper

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Overview

The incessant reality of the existing gender gap in the workplace, in relation to career advancement, creates an enormous need to understand further the causes and effects of the gender gap phenomenon. Though we understand that there are many challenges that affect women's advancement in the workplace, this study explains how and why work–life prioritisation patterns can suggestively influence the career advancement process of women of African origin in the UK. As a growing demography within the workplace, the study explores narratives from 15 women from Nigeria and Ghana, asking why and how they make choices that affect their work–life patterns, and the role of mentorship in advancing their careers across different sectors.

Introduction

In spite of the numerous efforts to curb gender gaps and foster equality in the workplace, research[1] shows that there are several factors that impede efforts towards equal opportunities, especially in relation to the advancement of women in the workplace. In response to concerns about work–life balance and career advancement of women, early studies about women and work–life balance establish the conflict between family duties and career demands.[2]

According to these studies, this conflict arises because some aspects of work and family roles are incompatible.[3] Following these previous studies, Adame et al[4] also mention other studies[5] that focus more on the business policies and improvements in business performance that reinforce the need for best practices concerning work–life balance, by attracting and retaining male and female talents within the business.

In spite of the efforts to attract both male and female talents within the business and encourage work–life balance through policies and performance, work–life balance remains an unclear phenomenon lacking a universal conceptual view. This therefore affects the organisational understanding and management of its employees' (both the male and female) work–life balance metrics. This suggests the need to understand how individuals perceive work–life balance and to understand the factors that influence their perceptions and decisions concerning achieving work–life balance.

Although work–life conflicts affect both men and women, a broad range of literature[6] focuses on women because of the higher impact it has on them and their career advancement process. This again indicates the lack of policies for varying outcomes regarding work–life balance.

Despite this evidence, and rather than having to consider the organisational gaps broadly, it is similarly necessary to identify demographic positioning even amongst the gender phenomenon, to determine the causes and effects on women's career advancement. To this effect, this work explores narratives from women of African origin to understand how they perceive and achieve work–life balance, and its impact on their career advancement process. The study explores 'how and why' these women prioritise commitments in relations to work and family life. Following the work reveals the role of mentorship in advancing their careers.

Review of the literature

This study draws from the extant literature[7] and defines work–life balance as the relationship between work and other aspects of an individual's life. Previous literature[8] argues that the term does not specifically take into consideration a more common or fixed understanding of the words 'life or balance'; this then permits several views as it relates to an individual's social construct. Hence, work–life balance has been a subject of debate amongst academics, practitioners and

policy-makers because there are constant changes in the way work is constructed and how this interferes with other non-work activities.[9] This thereby creates difficulty in finding a collective meaning for the term 'work–life balance'.

Consequently, Fleetwood[10] suggests that while current conceptualisations and theoretical positioning, debates, policies and practices designed to promote work–life balance might be persuasive, they create more problems in understanding the interrelatedness of the two words 'work' and 'life'. For instance, in primarily understanding the word 'life' in relation to non-work activities, there are a number of variables, ranging from family, hobbies, religion, entertainment, community engagements, and sports.[11] Again, this strengthens the debate on its ambiguity, as the variation of 'life'-related activities is boundless, it is difficult to obtain a universal view and it is likely to intersect in multiple, complex ways.

Subsequently, several studies have been done across various social groups: these groups include the ageing workforce, age diversity, working middle class, men and women in midlife, foreign women, African-American women, ethnic minority women, and managers without children.[12] This therefore indicates the validity of studying social groups in the work–life balance discourse to further strengthen and develop theoretical and conceptual views that influence practice. Subsequently, Kamenou[13] argues for a broader, more diverse approach to how different social groups and individuals react to work–life conflicts. By acknowledging and examining different forms of 'diversity', a more realistic analysis can take place, which can inform organisational policy and practice. This underpins the relevance and contribution of this study, which examines, from the broader discourse of women and work–life balance, ethnic minority women from Nigeria and Ghana – significantly, a growing demography within the UK workforce.[14]

Therefore, this study supports the literature that a relevant conceptual perspective of work–life balance significantly focuses on prioritising work and family activities,[15] and this also includes managing dependants and non-family households.[16] In addition, this study responds to the request[17] for precise conceptual views and the development of more inclusive perspectives that reflect the changes in the construct of society, the workplace, family and even individuals. Hence, to support similar discussions for a more inclusive view on work–family balance,[18] the study identifies and examines factors that influence the conceptual views of work–family balance regarding women of African origin in the UK.

Research methods

We used multiple theoretical perspectives – work–family conflict,[19] gender inequality,[20] and positioning theory[21] – to examine the narratives from 15 women of African origin who shared insights of the challenges they face concerning their work–life prioritisations and career advancement. We selected these participants using purposive sampling and conducted one-to-one semi-structured interviews.

We used thematic analysis to examine the themes derived from the narratives of how these women position themselves as social entities (wives, partners, mothers, carers, parents, supports, providers, employees).[22] Using Braun and Clarke,[23] we define thematic analysis as identifying and reporting themes derived from the data in order to interpret the research topic. The themes were derived by highlighting points raised by the participants that we considered significant to addressing the research question. These themes were prevalent because it was echoed across most of the interviews. We applied conventions for representing prevalence in thematic analysis, using the word 'majority' to indicate the number of participants,[24] and four themes were derived. These themes are cultural sensitivities, current phase in family and work life, personality types, and external influences such as policies and financial commitment.

Research findings

The findings show that aside from and despite one's educational qualifications, financial and family commitments significantly guide why and how these women make choices about work and career advancement. Likewise, the findings show that their socio-cultural construction, including personality types, informs the choices they make concerning work and family lifestyle, and these factors ultimately influence how they prioritise work and life commitments to achieve work–life balance. How they make these choices is also in relation to the support systems available to them – for instance, the workplace providing flexible work, shared work, extended maternity leave, childcare, and support from family and friends. Some of the respondents did acknowledge that their organisations provide support to help with work and family balance, such as flexible and shared work, extended maternity leave, and having consistent support at work.

However, the lack of these alternative work patterns and formal consistent support schemes expressed by other respondents indicates that support from the workplace for work and family balance depends on the business and organisational structure. In addition, the findings show that the lack of consistent support for work–family balance and towards career progression in the workplace highlights a need for these support opportunities to be long term. It also reveals how these women attain the needed support outside the workplace as they prioritise socio-cultural wants across different phases of their work and career progressions.

These women acknowledge the need for self-directed activities to enable them to manage work and family life expectations. Exploring this further, the narratives show that the women set career and family goals, and with the determination to achieve these goals and deal with arising conflicts comes the drive to interact with social networks that can provide the support needed in order to achieve these goals. The social networks include friends and family members, and religious groups. Consequently, from an institutional perspective, examining exclusion, for instance, from receiving social rights,[25] some of the women talk about how policies regarding immigration can hinder their access to having support, especially from parents and family members not living in the UK as they are sometimes denied entry for various reasons.

Furthermore, despite the aspiration to advance to senior management, some of the women indicated that the lack of appropriate mentorship and the influence of enculturation could affect this progression. Equally, the findings show the need for mentorship opportunities that are long term and can be effective even beyond the workplace as these women prioritise socio-cultural networks across different stages of their work and career progressions.

Practical importance and implications of research

The research reveals how socio- cultural factors can influence women's work and career advancement patterns. Hence, it postulates the need for various extended mentorship and coaching patterns within and beyond the workplace, using social network support systems. It also supports and proposes cultural diversity management practice within the workplace that pays attention to acculturation and enculturation, how an individual's socio-cultural construct, including personality type, can support or hinder their career advancement process. It further re-emphasises the need for flexible work patterns like shared work and part-time options that can still allow for career advancement.

Originality and value

Although this work explores women of African origin in the UK, drawing from empirical findings, it broadly contributes knowledge to diversity studies as it reveals the impact of personality types, enculturation and cultural sensitivities towards the career advancement of women. It acts as a lens to proposing the impact of mentoring and social networks, in the broader study of work–life balance, women and career advancement, and proposes the use of mentorship as an emancipatory vehicle for the career advancement of women.

Notes

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