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June 27th, 2022

Where are the women in Africa's corporate boardrooms?

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Women in Africa, like other global regions, are underrepresented in wage employment and senior leadership positions. In tandem with wider societal changes, there should be active participation from governments, the private sector and civil society to address the multifaceted drivers of gender inequality and improve equal opportunities for women in the workplace.

A successful career that leads to leadership at the highest decision-making body of an organisation is a lifetime goal for many working professionals. But even in the most gender-equal countries, this dream remains elusive for women more than men.

A growing body of evidence from institutions such as the [International Finance Corporation](#) (IFC), the [International Monetary Fund](#) (IMF), the [World Bank](#), the [International Labour Organization](#) (ILO) [McKinsey](#), the [Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development](#) (OECD) and the [European Commission](#) supports the business case for women in senior leadership positions. Companies

reportedly benefit from greater shareholder value, corporate governance, financial performance, return on equity and assets, customer and employee satisfaction, investor confidence and market reputation from having gender diversity on their boards. Women in leadership also serve as role models and often positively impact the workplace by creating a culture of inclusivity, adaptability, teamwork and collaboration.

Despite these benefits, women are often underrepresented in wage employment and, subsequently, in leadership positions. In sub-Saharan Africa, only 21% of **women are in wage employment**, translating into lower earning abilities and negative impacts on their economic and social security. With a low female labour force participation rate, fewer women than men make it to the first step of manager level in their careers, making it difficult to lay a foundation for progression to more senior roles.

The gender gaps in decision-making and leadership levels are a pressing social issue. There is also a critical economic and financial challenge for the corporate sector, with these gaps affecting GDP. As economies and companies seek to stimulate economic growth and financial performance, particularly given the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical to build back better and advocate for women's empowerment and active participation in the labour force from the ground up.

The African Development Bank **reports** that women occupy only 12% of corporate board seats in the continent. In 2015, Kenya was **leading** African country for the number of women on boards (19.8%), followed closely by Ghana (17.7%) and South Africa (17.4%). In 2021, Kenya's diversity in its boardrooms stood at 36%, up from 21% in 2017, according to the **Board Diversity and Inclusion Survey**.

Despite the commendable efforts in getting more women onto boards in Kenya, for example, a report by **Equileap** in 2019 indicates that none of the 61 publicly listed companies on the Nairobi Securities Exchange has achieved gender balance across their boards, executive leadership and workforce. In addition, when the number of women on boards and the number of women holding the chairmanship and executive director positions (the most powerful) are compared, the numbers leave more to be desired. Only three publicly listed companies (5%) have a female chair, and only seven companies (12%) have a

female CEO. The absence of female executive directors displays an inadequate pipeline of senior female managers in Kenyan companies. Over time, changes in these metrics will signal a meaningful difference in Kenya's corporate culture on women's participation in senior decision-making and leadership roles.

What can be done?

To address gender gaps in women's leadership, a "whole of society" approach is needed to challenge individual and societal biases (both conscious and unconscious) that inhibit the realisation of the full leadership potential of the female workforce.

Governments can take the lead in championing initiatives and implementing policies that promote inclusive leadership, such as quota systems and diversity disclosure requirements that oblige institutions to report on gender diversity. This has worked in India, Malaysia, Brazil, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Norway, Spain and Israel, which have implemented quotas for women on boards of listed and state-owned companies with great success. The UK and the US have also successfully used voluntary targets to require companies to consider gender diversity when constituting their boards. It is commendable that several African countries, such as Uganda, Senegal and Rwanda, have launched quotas to enhance women's leadership in the political sphere. These initiatives have indirectly opened the door for women's equal access to and full participation in power structures beyond the political sphere, by changing cultural norms and subconscious biases that previously insulated their full participation in decision-making and governance.

The private sector can adopt corporate governance codes that promote equal opportunities at work, and which disclose information on the gender diversity of their boards. This will facilitate the tracking and monitoring of progress. Companies can also immediately begin attracting and retaining qualified, talented women by developing gender diversity strategies suited to their unique environment and needs.

On the other hand, civil society has the mandate to hold the government and private sector accountable and embark on initiatives that enlighten and empower women. We also need institutions that develop the pipeline of board-ready

women by providing sponsorship, mentorship, training, visibility and networking opportunities for senior female managers.

Finally, across the board, we need committed leadership by male leaders to identify and nurture female talent. This cannot be a fight by women alone.

It is imperative to continue championing gender equality in the workplace. We should strive for a world where women and men enjoy equal opportunities to rise to their full potential; where gender diversity and inclusion are recognised and rewarded; where women's leadership at the CEO, Board, Chairmanship and other senior leadership positions is normalised; where women can be judged fairly based on their skills, talent and leadership potential and not be held back because of their gender. Unless we empower women, who lest we forget account for half the global population, to achieve their full economic and leadership potential, Africa's economy will not attain sustainable and inclusive development.

Photo by Anna Shvets.

About the author



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Gloria Muhoro is a Senior Development Officer and the Head of the Development Unit at UNHCR's Regional Bureau for Southern Africa. She has strong experience as an international development expert with a track record of advising governments and international development organisations on inclusive growth strategies and leading partnerships that advance the social and economic development of vulnerable persons, particularly women, youth, and forcibly displaced persons in Africa.

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