

# Reframing Culture, Power and Women Career Advancement in Nigerian Organisation: A Postmodernist Approach

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## ABSTRACT

Traditionally, organisations conceive of women as “the second sex”, to allude Beauvoir’s verbiage. This mode of women conceptualisation regarding leadership and career advancement in relation to male-dominated business world is sustained by chauvinistic *modus operandi* called patriarchy that owes its existence and pathogenesis to stereotyped, universalised notion called patriarchy *prima facie* hegemonic. This system has generated a leadership pattern that relegates women to the background. Nigerian organisation, which is historically patriarchal in constitution, is typical of this. However, as this paper shall argue, to reframe Nigerian organisations for women career advancement and empowerment thereby changing organisational culture, a postmodernist approach will facilitate this process. Thus, a postmodernist view of Nigerian organisations will mark a change from the norm of male-female dichotomy as well as reshape male-dominated organisational leadership. This will bring a paradigm shift in Nigeria’s organisational culture. Paradigm shift is a marker for systematic change in practice capable of radicalising established canon. This shift is central in reframing women empowerment and advancement in Nigerian organisations.

**Keywords:** career advancement, Nigerian women, organisational culture, postmodernism, power, reframing.

## INTRODUCTION: ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE, POWER AND WOMEN

The present fascination about culture as well as what it portends to organisational leadership finds provenance in the 1980s with the work and efforts of writers such as Deal and Kennedy (1982), Peters and Waterman (1982) and Allen and Kraft (1982). In the works of Allaire and Firsirotu (1984) as well as Albrow (1997), there is an acknowledgement that the concept, culture, had attracted the attention of leadership and management experts earlier (Eldridge and Combie, 1974) before the advent of what Turner (1986) characterised as “culture craze” of the 1980s. In this regard, the works of Mouton and Blake (1969) and Silverman (1970) give support to the idea that culture had been a much-debated phenomenon before it became a groundswell and fascination in the 1980s.

Organisational culture is the defining features of any organisation. It is the aggregate of beliefs, values, approaches and mores that give shape, characteristics and meaning to an organisation's *modus operandi*. Organisational culture also validates an organisation's ethos. In the preface to his *Organisational Culture and Leadership* (2004), Edgar Schein deepens this insight by saying that ...organisational culture has come of age. Not only did the concept have staying power but it is even being broadened ... As it turns out, culture is essential to understanding inter-group conflict at the organisational level... In an age in which leadership is touted over and over again as a critical variable in defining the success or failure of organisations, it becomes all the more important to look at the other side of the leadership coin – how leaders create culture and how culture defines and creates leaders. (2004, p. xi)

Following from the above, Harris & Moran (1996) asserted that organisational culture is “the base from which” (70) leaders and managers operate. Similarly, “culture defines how those in organisation should behave in a given set of circumstances” (Burnes, 2004, p. 170).

Taking the debate further, for Keuning (1998), there are two key issues that underwrite organisational culture, they are “to provide relatively fixed patterns for handling and solving problems ... [and to] ... reduce uncertainty for members of organisations with new situation” (p.46). In an interesting work by Cummings & Huse titled *Organisational Development and Strategy* (1989), they argued that culture has four elements that include: basic assumptions, values, norms and artefacts. This distillation is similar to Hofstede's (1985) observation that highlighted values, rituals, heroes and symbols as major elements of organisational culture. In the same vein, the work of Handy (1986), Scien (1985) and Quin and McGrath (1985) offer diverse twists to what essentially characterises organisational culture.

Related to this paper in terms of how organisational culture has internecine relationship with power for planned change or reconfiguration of women's organisational roles is the urgency of postmodernism. This is because one of the achievements of postmodernism is the gradual reshaping of organisational culture for multiplicity of voices. Therefore, cultures worldwide are changing profoundly, and nowhere is this change more obvious than in the work culture (Harris, 1985; Harris & Moran, 1996). One of the hallmarks of the change in organisational culture is the reframed mode of women recognition in organisational leadership structure. This new order has come with the sanction of postmodernist interpretation of truth and reality, which deconstructs the grand narratives of modernity by granting multiplicities of meanings as well as identification of other power loci. As Kanter (1997) suggested,

...managerial work is undergoing such enormous and rapid change that many managers are reinventing their profession as they go. With little precedent to guide them, they are watching hierarchy fade away and the clear distinctions of title, task, department, even corporation, blur. Faced with extraordinary levels of complexity and interdependency, they watch traditional sources erode and the old motivational tools lose their magic. (p. 59)

The pressure of postmodernism has triggered a rethink of the old organisational order. The Nigerian situation is not an exemption.

The reason for rethinking organisational structures, male-female relationship in organisations, power struggle and organisational health is the contingency of postmodernism:

...the starting point of any reflection on social innovation and post-modern organisation ought to be what characterises post-modernism as such: the individual experience of contingency. This is the experience that everything that is, could be otherwise. Not only the grand systems explaining the world, religion and science, fail to grant orientation and meaning. It is the very, leading discourses of modern society, politics, and economy, which cannot provide stability any longer. (Kiehne & Klein, 2006, p. 3)

This is also true of Nigerian organisations. As Nigerian organisations yield to the pressures of postmodernism, the organisations' leadership is largely implicated as it is the core part of organisational health.

Considering the changes in leadership role in relation to male-female dichotomy, more women have been empowered to take the mantle of leadership in organisations as against discrimination, stereotyping, prejudice and unfairness that characterised the old order (Eagly & Carli, 2003). The transition from old order to new order in the wake of postmodernism is animated by the fact that the construction of organisational goals and objectives are in themselves a political as well as power project (Pfeffer, 1992). Thus, for women to advance in organisational roles, the whole epistemology of modernity needs to be reworked via postmodernism to give more power to the women in terms of leadership. It is through this new source of power, which is a consequence of dismantling meta-narratives or grand narratives precipitated by modernity that power is gained by the women. Power is used by women in this instance to sustain their new positions as well as to influence decisions in workplaces and their spheres of contacts. In corroborating this standpoint,

...men are the major determinants of political actions and inactions generally concerned with the perpetuation of power of the state ...when women compete with men for access to political power, they do so on the terms already established by men for competition among themselves. The success of women in politics (or organisation) like that of any group cannot be achieved within a system without displacing or replacing the existing elite (My parenthesis, Chapman, 1993, p. 11).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This paper is based on a postmodernist conceptualisation of contemporary organisation, with particular emphasis on Nigeria's organisation. Since the publication of Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), which resists the dialectics of the illusion and totalitarianism of "grand narrative", efforts have been galvanised in rethinking the unbounded relativism inherent in thinking outside the box. Thinking outside the box in this instance means, looking beyond the constraining scope of one-dimensional way of perceiving reality or truth; it also entails rising above the epistemological foundations of modernity's meta-narrative that universalises truth by discountenancing multidimensional perception of truth. A quintessential characteristic of modern culture is the belief in grandiose notion of closed-ended answers to human questions – this resonates with the idea that the world belongs to man. Hence, the apprehension of truth and meaning is unilateral, one-sided and essentially patriarchal. In eroding the contributions of other perspectives to apprehending truth, women contribution to building society and organisations is not factored in.

As indicated by Sky Marsen in his *Communication Studies* (Marsen, 2006), postmodernism includes the following indices:

- A notion of personal identity as fragmented or dispersed owing basically to contexts
- A questioning of ideas of linear reality as well as linear-causally-based narratives; thus opting for parallel cosmoses of multiple realities or truths
- An rejection of the search for origins, the transcendental cause and universal meaning of things or phenomena
- The blurring of truth and fiction in terms of universal reality mainly in relation to the mass media.

Accordingly, for Jean-Francois Lyotard, one of the currencies of our age and time is the groundswell of “incredulity towards meta-narrative” (Bhat, 2010, p. 5).

In this vein, postmodernism is the critique of meta-narrative as well as grand narratives, the consciousness that such narratives or mode of representations serve to blur or mask contradictions, multiplicities and alternatives that are inherent in any social organisation or practice. This is the case with business organisations. Following in the footsteps of this pattern, modern organisational culture has aligned its practices to see truth or reality in social organisations to be unilateral, which is a mirroring of the grand narratives. This has ensconced an organisational culture that puts the women at the background of leadership, career advance and fulfilment by putting men at the helm of affairs. As a consequence of man-made world, organisations are accused and are in fact plagued by sexist orientation as well as practice, a tradition that finds anchorage in modernist business culture that celebrates male dominance of leadership structures in organisations.

## **EN/COUNTERING GENDERED NIGERIAN ORGANISATIONS**

It is on record that women in Nigeria constitute about half of the population of the country (Okpara, 2006; Afolabi et al, 2003) yet they are not adequately represented in organisations, workplace, politics, professional life and other areas of the society as men. Accordingly, in the thinking of Agbalajobi (2010),

Nigerian women constitute about half of the population of the country and are known to play vital roles as mother, producer, time manager, community organiser and social and political activist. But despite the major roles they play and their population, the society has not given recognition to these and to the fact that they are discriminated against. This is due to some cultural stereotypes, abuse of religion, traditional practices and patriarchal societal structures. (p. 75)

In instantiating this, The Nigerian Federal Civil Service, which unarguably is Nigeria’s highest employer of labour has 76% of its workers as men, while only 24% are women. Also, women occupy less than 14% of the organisation’s top management position (Goldstar, 2005). Similarly, according to Mordi, Adedoyin and Ajonbadi (2011), “... available statistics reveals a high level of disparity in levels of gender diversity at top management positions in Nigeria” (p. 11).

Since Nigeria’s independence in 1960 successive governments have proclaimed pursuing equal employment opportunities. They also declared balancing the disequilibrium as regards male-female ration at top management levels in Nigerian organisations and civil service (Yahaya & Akinyele, 1992).

But evidentially, these have never been justified; rather there is preponderance of Nigerian male employees, managers and leaders in organisations (Otite, 2005). Thus,

... after almost five decades since Nigeria became an independent nation-state ... there can be absolutely no doubt about major gain in the opportunity that have become available to women and majority groups in the civil service. However, prejudice continued to exist as does the glass ceiling that limits women from enjoying truly equal opportunities in the Nigeria public service. ... Although, the national government created Ministry of Women Affairs almost a decade ago, there is no doubt that the government shapes and limits women's role in the civil services. Gender is still central to understand the process (Olufemi & David, 2011, p. 112).

The above paints in a bold relief the issue of women discrimination and institutional disempowerment in Nigeria. Thus, the issues of women empowerment and career advancement in Nigeria are still faced with serious dilemma (Okpara, 2006; Hackney, 2010).

The background to female discrimination and disempowerment in Nigeria originated from her traditional value system that is *prima facie* patriarchal and sexist. From time immemorial Nigerian society has been patriarchal in scope and reach. Patriarchy has been a fundamental characteristic of Nigerian traditional ethos (Aina, 1998; Nwagbara, 2009). Nigerian society is primarily structured on the axis of social stratification couched in male supremacy and materialism. This societal arrangement places men above women in terms of leadership, power, material acquisition and voice in society. This mode of societal framework comes with differentiation in sex role: women do more of the domestic work, while their male counterparts do more of leadership roles be it in the family or organisations (Kramarae, 1992; Aina, 1998). Commenting on patriarchy, Adrienne Rich in her *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, observed that

The power of the fathers: a familial, social, ideological, and political system in which, by direct pressure – or through tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and division of labour – men determine what parts women shall or shall not play, and the female is everywhere subsumed by the male (1977, pp. 57-8).

Sexism in Nigerian society and organisations is tangible (Hackney, 2010). And in order to break this mould for women empowerment, career advancement and reinvented organisation, a postmodernist approach as this paper argues, is necessary.

## **FROM DISEMPOWERMENT TO POWER: TOWARDS A DE-GENDERED NIGERIAN ORGANISATION**

In de-gendering Nigerian organisation, it is pertinent to approach this by looking at the concept of power as not being fixated at a particular place. This process amounts to Foucault's power formulation, which deals with multiple power loci. Using the Foucauldian thesis,

...power is dispersed across complicated and heterogeneous social networks marked by ongoing struggle. Power is not something present at specific locations within those networks, but is instead always at issue in ongoing attempts to (re) produce effective social alignments, and conversely to avoid or erode their effects, often by producing various counter-alignments (Gutting 1994, pp. 112-113).

In circumventing patriarchy, it is needful to rethink power structure by decentralising power across varied social networks. This is in sync with Foucauldian analysis of power. Foucault's idea of power resonates with a radical departure from the rhetoric of "totalising discourses" and great truths. He does this by presenting difference in modes of apprehension of truth. This also detonates with disengaging from the past as well as breaking away from historically conditioned fixated power formation.

Foucault's theory dovetails with the idea that "there is a multiplicity of standpoints, values, outlooks amongst feminists" (Assiter, 1996, p. 88) that could be reached through decentralising power loci. This position resonates with postmodernism, which offers unbounded relativism. Thus, in decentralising power as well as authority this brings about empowerment and renewed zeal in the organisations as more people are driven to engage (Mills and Friesen, 2001). As people view leadership factor in organisation as a shared, collegial activity, they would do their best. This enlarges an organisation's power base. Thus, people (women inclusive) would view organisation as

...something people do for themselves which involves solidarity and participation in the struggle for greater control over their lives.... This has propelled human beings and the women folk to desire a channel of emancipation called empowerment. It is a process by which disadvantaged people, women, work to or as individuals to increase control over issues and events that determine their lives (Akinsanya, 2011, p. 62).

The above is crucial for reframing organisations along the axis of changing from disempowerment to empowerment.

In addition, a de-gendered Nigerian organisation will usher in a new organisational landscape that reverberates with what Furnham and Gunter (1993) called "we-feeling" mentality that brings about social as well as organisational cohesiveness. This new sense of oneness as well as solidarity transcends gender disparity and differentiation that were obstacle to organisation's enhanced level of productivity and success. From a postmodernist perspective as identified by Pascale (1990), a de-engendered organisation brings about a "new organisational paradigm" (Cited in Armstrong, 2009, p. 364), which has the following characteristics:

- A movement from content (essentialism) to process that brings about holistic approach to problem solving
- From militaristic organisational structure to commitment engendered by democratic principle
- Emphasis shifting from vertical to horizontal collaboration across units
- Focus shifting from status-driven image that managers think and workers do as they are told to a view of managers as facilitators, with employers (workers) empowered to initiate improvements, change and leadership
- A change from hierarchy to network model of leadership
- Shift from machined corporate world to "soft" dimensions of doing things.

In broad strokes, as Huczynski & Buchanan (2007) stated, postmodernism symbolises a break from business-as-usual as well as confronts headlong the way we traditionally see organisations.

Thus, breaking the “glass ceiling” (Hackney, 2010; Mordi, Adedoyin & Ajonbadi, 2011) or “glass wall” (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2010) in Nigeria for male acceptance of female managerial expertise as well as career advancement, should be seen as an opportunity for women to contribute to power exertion in organisations. This process comes with power play, a necessary ingredient for influencing the dynamic of relationship through exertion of influence. Hence, power relations between male and female employers or managers (leaders) are usually changed in such instance for inclusiveness and equal, fare participation. The entire gamut of reformulating work relationship between male and female Nigerian employees brings to light the need to challenge ossified assumptions that hamper growth and value co-creation precipitated by patriarchy. It is also a potent way of bringing dynamism, creativity and renewed power base to an organisation’s productivity engine (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1995).

In changing the organisational order through de-genderisation, communication plays a vital role. Remember, the whole process of remapping a new organisations stems from cultural re-orientation. So, this process would have to consider cultural re-orientation that will bring de-genderisation as a communication process. This is what Hall and Hall (2002) referred to when they said “culture is communication” (p. 24). What this means according to them is that in reworking organisational culture, the world of communication should be divided into three parts: behaviour, material things and words. Words deal with medium of business; material things indicate status and power; while behaviour provides feedback on people’s feelings as well as helps to deal with possible confrontation or conflict. Technically, by ensuring the postmodernist organisations appreciate these variables, helps the delivery and understanding of a “silent language” (Hall, 1959), which deals with unconscious recognition as well as dissemination of certain behavioural patterns that are outside the region of conscious awareness. This gradually helps in reshaping an organisation’s ritual that women are incapable of doing certain tasks or inferior to men. Thus, this silent language embraces a wide range of evolutionary ideas, practices, and solutions to issues which have their origin in the shared experiences of low-level employees as well as managers. This is capable of changing the relationship dynamic of organisations in Nigeria.

Communication is an integral part of organisational culture dissemination. So, an understanding of how it works is critical as it could be used as a conduit for impacting people’s conscious as well as unconscious behaviour. Words have power in reshaping the human minds. This is what Fairclough (1992) identified as “linguistic turn” in management of organisations, when communication is the mainstay of leading change effectively for organisational renewal. Language (communication) is undeniably an integral facet of culture; in fact, language is the vehicle that transports culture. Language in this instance means communication, which is crucial for conveying an organisation’s ideals, ritual, myth, mores, and culture in the final analysis. Similarly, in overcoming cultural barriers to change, communication is at the heart of it. Kotter’s (1995) leading change model places much premium on communicating an organisation’s vision of change, which in this context translates into communicating changing male-female dichotomy for a reinvented Nigerian organisation. Since culture is an inveterate phenomenon, which brings high rate of resistance during organisational transformation, communication will help in curbing rate of resistance as well as conflicts that could ensue from this process.

## **REFRAMING FOR CHANGE: STRATEGIES FOR MANAGED CULTURE CHANGE AND ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN**

In reframing Nigeria’s organisational culture for change mediated through reworked male-female dynamic, Schein’s (2004a) analysis is useful for an envisioned Nigerian organisational leadership calculus, which will bring new leadership that will empower women. Schein’s (2004a) schema for managed



culture change is relevant to how Nigerian organisations could reshape its organisational culture to factor in women career advancement and worth in leadership. It is also predicated on the urgency of postmodernism as contemporary organisations are tired of the new order. In instantiating this, organisations must “either move away from bureaucratic guarantees to post-entrepreneurial flexibility or they stagnate” (Kanter, 1990, p. 356). In Schein’s (2004a) concept, there is emphasis on what he described as “the psychosocial dynamics of transformational organisational change” (p. 319). This approach inheres in the following below.

### **Disconfirmation**

Schein’s (2004a) first point for realising managed culture change is what he called disconfirmation. This is akin to Lewin’s (1951) term unfreezing that deals with establishing a motivation for change. This process naturally throws the existing organisational culture into disquiet because it comes with wave of newness and unfamiliarity. In Schein’s (2004a) analysis, he adds more to Lewin’s (1951) postulation by introducing three sub-sets of disconfirmation (unfreezing). They are: 1. Availability of enough disconfirming data; 2. enough psychological safety, 3; and the nexus between the disconfirming data and the organisation’s beliefs, values and ideals causing anxiety.

### **Cognitive restructuring**

Another point that Schein (2004a) talks about is “cognitive restructuring”. Once an organisation is unfrozen, a new landscape emerges that is completely different from the old organisational structure and core values. In making sure there is smooth transition or adequate management of attendant reactions in view of behavioural change, organisations need to provide what Schein (2004a) called “a genuine cognitive redefinition” (p. 325). This cognitive redefinition takes into account factors that will facilitate a smooth transition as well as forces that could impede such transition or change. Lewin (1951) called this part of change process “moving”. Hence, the entire processes “... unfold in an interactive fashion with much backtracking and omission” (Buchanan & Storey, 1997, p. 127).

### **Refreezing**

This is likened to Lewin’s (1951) model of *refreezing* organisations for planned, structural change. This entails the mechanism and process that ensure that new organisational landscape is reinforced in order to be permanent set of code for reinvented organisation. This is the final step in Lewin’s (1951) planned change model. Accordingly, this step of planned change “seeks to stabilise the group at a new quasi-stationary equilibrium in order to ensure that the new behaviours are relatively safe from regression” (Schein, 2004b, p. 986).

In adding to Schein’s (2004) schema, it should be added here that for a reframed Nigerian organisational culture, institutional framework that supports what Afolabi, Obude, Okediji and Ezeh (2008, p. 2) called “democratic employee-oriented style of leadership” is imperative. This is about making organisational leadership participatory, shared and inclusive. This will bring about the concept of connected leadership. Warr and Wall (1975) argued for employee-oriented leadership that is inclusive of all in decision-making process. This is needed in Nigerian organisation. When everybody contributes to an organisational leadership structure, it brings about commitment, sense of oneness and high performance. This also brings about synergistic organisational performance (Harris and Moran, 1996).



In re-imagining Nigerian organisation of the future, it is critical to do this by deconstructing the basic programme that supports and sustains the culture that relegates women to the background. This is because the whole act of empowering women or their career advancement rests on the scaffold of postmodernist consciousness that is steeped in seeing multiplicities in terms of power loci. Armstrong (2009) supports this view:

Postmodernism is about challenging assumptions, taking nothing for granted. It 'deconstructs' conventional wisdom about organisations so that previously unconsidered alternative approaches are revealed (p. 364).

Thus, a deconstruction of a landscape that feeds into this pattern of organisational behaviour nurtured and groomed via the calculus of culture is essential in rethinking gender difference as well as turning it into organisational capital rather than destructive organisational force.

Another factor that is pertinent to women career advancement and empowerment in Nigeria is the application of Lewin's (1951) force field analysis. In Nigeria, women should see organisations as perceptual field that requires their individual activities mediated through "life space" to moderate what happens in the "perceptual field". In Lewin's (1951) thesis, the invisible but palpable space is the perceptual field; while the life space entails our sphere of contacts. Therefore, to bring change, Nigerian women should reconcile disparities and resistance that ensue as forces in the perceptual world such as ideals, principles and mores wrestle with the ones in their spheres of contact like self-image, leader-subordinate relationship and others. Thus, if women in organisations perceive their spheres of contact (life space) as potential platforms for reinventing value system, they would be influencing what happens in the perceptual field or the wider community. This would impact organisational change towards women leadership participation.

In advancing Nigerian women's career, it should be viewed as a socialisation process. Socialisation is an instrument of influence (Crow and Matthews, 1998). According to Baker (1990), socialisation is "an influence process leading to organisational control" (p. 7). Therefore, socialisation is an effective process through which work roles are negotiated, participation is called forth, and the social cohesion as well as co-dependency necessary for production is maintained. In the socialisation process, an employee or individual is in an active reciprocal relationship with the organisation that results in professional learning, development and career advancement. Socialisation is two-pronged: the individual and the organisation (group). This is why Mortimer and Simmons (1978) considered socialisation as thus:

Socialisation, at any stage, is two-fold process that must be viewed from the vantage of the group as well as the individual. For the group, socialisation is a mechanism through which new members learn the values, norms, knowledge, beliefs, and the interpersonal another skills that facilitate role performance and further group goals. From the perspective of the individual, socialisation is a process of learning to participate in social life (p. 422).

Socialisation methods differ from organisation to organisation; they are formed by an organisation's culture. Thus, through a virile organisational socialisation process, which is shared and collegial in scope, women could change organisational power dynamics and leadership in Nigeria.

## CONCLUSION

Postmodernism is crucial for a Nigerian organisational culture change that takes cognisance of women empowerment, career advancement and leadership to be realised, as this paper has argued. In embracing the multiplicity of perspectives to apprehending as well as interpreting truth and reality, which are made available by postmodernism, there is a vision of a dismantled modernity that advances the thesis of grand narrative that is dismissive of other means to understanding reality. One-dimensional way of interpreting reality, which is precipitated by patriarchy, is the main reason Nigerian organisational practice is patriarchal in scope as it espouses men's ideology of dominance and control over women. To reframe this organisational paradigm, a postmodernist approach will engender new ways of locating truths by seeing the positive parts in women leadership as well as balancing the disequilibrium in male-female organisational roles and leadership. So, for a reframed Nigerian organisation that will shore up women's career advancement, empowerment and leadership, a postmodernist approach is of essence. Hence, postmodernism affords multivalent approaches to dealing with reality.

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