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Main Challenges and Opportunities for Greater Female Participation in Leadership Positions in the Office of the Auditor General of Namibia

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INTRODUCTION

The participation of women in leadership positions has become an important focus for public institutions around the world, especially within Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs) that play a central role in accountability and governance. As institutions responsible for ensuring transparency in the management of public resources, SAIs are expected to reflect values of fairness, equity, and professionalism. This makes gender representation in leadership not only a matter of internal human resource policy, but also a reflection of the institution's commitment to broader public sector transformation. The Office of the Auditor General (OAG) of Namibia, like many SAIs in the region, has made steady progress in improving gender balance within its workforce, yet the advancement of women into senior leadership roles remains limited.

This report examines the main challenges and opportunities for increasing female participation in leadership positions within the OAG. The developments in Namibia's legislative environment, together with the country's reputation for supporting gender equality, provide an important backdrop for this discussion. National policies such as the Affirmative Action (Employment) Act and Namibia's commitments to international agreements have created a framework that encourages equal representation. Despite this, a noticeable gap persists between the number of women entering the audit profession and the number who ultimately reach senior management roles.

The central objective of this report is to explore the factors that influence this gap and to identify practical ways the OAG can strengthen female leadership. The discussion considers historical context, institutional practices, literature on gender and leadership, and internal initiatives within the SAI. A case example is also used to illustrate how existing barriers and enablers play out in practice. While the institution has taken steps to support diversity, there is still significant room to build a more inclusive leadership pipeline.

By reviewing both the challenges and the opportunities, this report aims to provide a balanced analysis that can inform future planning and policy development within the OAG. It offers insights that may also be useful for other SAIs working toward similar goals. The overall intention is to support a leadership environment where women have equal access to growth, recognition, and advancement.

1. Contextualization

The Office of the Auditor General (OAG) of Namibia plays an essential role in ensuring accountability and transparency in the public sector. As a constitutional institution established under Article 127 of the Namibian Constitution, it is responsible for auditing government accounts and strengthening public financial management. Over the years, the OAG has made efforts to modernize its operations and build a more diverse and capable workforce. Despite these advances, gender disparities in leadership remain noticeable, even though the institution employs a significant number of women at professional and trainee levels.

Gender inequality in leadership is not unique to the OAG. Namibia has progressive policies on gender equality, including the National Gender Policy, the Affirmative Action (Employment) Act (1998), and the National Development Plans which emphasize inclusion and equal opportunity. The country has also been recognized for high female representation in parliament. However, these national gains do not always translate into equal representation in senior leadership positions across institutions.

Institutionally, the OAG has a structured organogram where leadership roles, particularly at director and deputy director levels, remain predominantly filled by men. Although women hold many supervisory and mid-level management roles, their progression into senior positions tends to slow down. The reasons are often complex and linked to cultural norms, institutional practices, and workplace dynamics. At the same time, there are promising signs of progress, including increased recruitment of female auditors, targeted capacity-building, and a growing acknowledgment within the institution of the importance of gender equity.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Research on gender and leadership consistently highlights several recurring patterns. One is the “leaky pipeline,” which describes a gradual decline in the number of women as seniority increases. Scholars note a combination of structural, cultural, and personal factors that influence career progression. Common themes include limited access to mentoring, biased perceptions about leadership traits, and work-life balance challenges.

Social role theory suggests that traditional expectations about men and women’s roles still shape workplace behavior. Leadership is often viewed through a masculine lens, emphasizing assertiveness and dominance. When women display these same qualities, they may face subtle penalties, while those who adopt a more collaborative style may be undervalued. This dynamic can limit opportunities for women despite strong performance.

Intersectionality theory also helps deepen the analysis. It emphasizes how gender does not operate alone but interacts with other factors such as age, race, socioeconomic background, and family responsibilities. In Namibia’s context, cultural expectations, caregiving roles, and community obligations often intersect with professional demands, influencing women’s leadership opportunities.

Studies on public sector leadership further emphasize the importance of organizational culture and institutional support. Where institutions implement gender-responsive policies, leadership development programs, and clear promotion pathways, women's representation at senior levels tends to improve. Without these structures, gender inequality is more likely to persist.

3. Relevant Policies, Laws, and Regulations

Namibia has a strong legal framework in support of gender equality. The Constitution guarantees equal rights for all citizens. The Affirmative Action (Employment) Act requires institutions to actively promote representation of designated groups, including women. The Labour Act emphasizes non-discrimination and equal opportunities. In addition, Namibia is a signatory to international agreements such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the SADC Gender Protocol, both of which call for measures to promote women's participation in leadership.

For the OAG, these frameworks shape institutional policies, recruitment practices, and training strategies. The institution must comply with national laws, report affirmative action statistics, and show progress in diversifying its workforce. Despite this, the translation of legal commitments into tangible leadership outcomes depends on internal leadership development structures, the availability of opportunities, and institutional willingness to challenge long-standing patterns.

4. Internal Measures Within the SAI

The OAG has introduced several practices that support female staff, although these initiatives are still evolving. They include:

- **Training and Professional Development:**

The OAG encourages staff to pursue professional qualifications such as ACCA, CA, and other auditing certifications. Many women benefit from these programs, which help build technical skills needed for leadership.

- **Performance Management Systems:**

The institution uses a structured performance framework that emphasizes merit-based assessments. While this helps promote fairness, it may not fully account for existing structural barriers faced by women.

- **Affirmative Action Compliance:**

Regular reporting and monitoring help highlight gender representation patterns. This creates some institutional pressure to improve participation at senior levels.

- **Mentorship and Informal Coaching:**

Although not fully formalized, many women gain support from supervisors who guide them through complex audits and leadership tasks. However, the lack of an official mentorship program is a missed opportunity.

- **Flexible Work Provisions (Informal):**

Supervisors sometimes accommodate personal responsibilities, especially for women managing both work and family responsibilities. However, without formal policies, practices vary across departments.

While these measures signal positive intent, the absence of structured leadership pipelines, gender-responsive HR policies, and consistent mentorship limits the full development of women into leadership roles.

5. Case Study: Progress and Ongoing Challenges

A useful illustration comes from the increasing number of female audit team leaders over the past decade. Many high-performing women have risen through the ranks from Audit Associate to Senior Auditor and Supervisor. They handle complex audits, lead teams in the regions, and contribute to quality assurance and technical discussions.

However, only a small portion of these women transition to senior management roles. Several challenges appear repeatedly:

- **Limited Opportunities for Leadership Exposure:**

Women often shoulder heavy operational workloads but receive fewer strategic or high-visibility assignments that position them for promotion.

- **Uneven Application of Institutional Support:**

Supervisors vary in how they mentor or recommend staff. Women who do not have advocates within the institution may advance more slowly.

- **Family and Caregiving Pressures:**

Audit work involves extensive travel, tight deadlines, and long hours. Many women report difficulty balancing these demands with caregiving responsibilities, which can influence promotion readiness.

- **Unconscious Bias:**

Although rarely explicit, assumptions about women's availability, assertiveness, or ability to handle pressure may affect promotion decisions.

Despite these barriers, the OAG has examples of women who have broken through to leadership positions. Their progress shows that with adequate support, recognition, and equitable opportunities, women can thrive in senior roles.

CONCLUSION

The analysis highlights that while Namibia has a strong legal and policy foundation for gender equality, the practical advancement of women into leadership roles within the Office of the Auditor General remains uneven. The institution employs many capable women, yet the progression from mid-level to senior leadership is slower than expected. Several factors contribute to this, including cultural expectations, work-life balance challenges, limited structured mentorship, and a shortage of leadership development pathways.

At the same time, the OAG has meaningful opportunities to strengthen female leadership. The presence of many high-performing women at professional levels shows a strong talent base. National policies also create an enabling environment for greater inclusion. The institution's training programs and performance systems form a solid foundation that can be expanded to target leadership development.

To close the gap, the OAG may consider a more structured approach to equity. A formal mentorship program, with dedicated leadership exposure for women, would help prepare them for senior roles. Gender-responsive HR practices, including clear promotion criteria and flexible work options, could also help address existing barriers. Regular leadership training tailored to women, along with visible support from senior executives, would help reinforce the institution's commitment to equity.

Collecting and analyzing gender-disaggregated data would guide decision-making and help monitor progress. Engagement with international networks such as AFROSAI-E and INTOSAI could bring in best practices and opportunities for collaboration. Building a culture where women feel supported, recognized, and encouraged to lead is essential for sustained change.

In conclusion, the OAG has both the responsibility and the opportunity to create a more inclusive leadership landscape. With deliberate strategies, consistent internal policies, and visible leadership commitment, the institution can make significant progress toward strengthening female participation in leadership roles.

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