

EXCHANGE PROGRAM

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

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Main Challenges and Opportunities for Greater Female Participation in Leadership Positions in SAI Zimbabwe

Introduction

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was embraced by all United Nations Member States in 2015, provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. As a member of the United Nations, Zimbabwe has developed a National Development Strategy (NDS) with the theme "Towards a Prosperous and Empowered Upper Middle-Income Society by 2030." This strategy outlines various national priorities that entities within the country must contribute to in order to achieve the overarching goals.

The Supreme Audit Institution (SAI) of Zimbabwe, known as the Office of the Auditor General (OAG), plays a crucial role in the national priority of governance. This role is further enhanced by the INTOSAI P-12, which emphasizes the need for the SAI to strengthen accountability, transparency, and integrity in government and public sector entities. In line with these frameworks, the OAG has recognized the importance of gender mainstreaming as a strategic approach to foster inclusivity and equality within its operations.

The OAG has committed itself to promoting gender equality and inclusivity within the office. The office is dedicated to creating a workplace that champions gender equality and fosters an inclusive culture. It is therefore no surprise that the OAG has joined the global community in marking the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence, observed from November 25 to December 10. The theme for this year, "Invest to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls," aligns with the OAG's commitment to maintaining a safe, respectful, and inclusive workplace.

Opportunities for Female Participation in Leadership

Gender Focal Person

One significant step taken by SAI Zimbabwe is the appointment of a Gender Focal Person. This individual, who is a female leader and principal auditor, is responsible for ensuring that gender issues are not overlooked within the organization. In addition to her auditing duties, she actively advocates for women's representation and participation at all levels. The focal person leads gender awareness programs, disseminates information, fosters communication, and ensures alignment of gender equality issues with the broader goals of the OAG. Her efforts also include organizing workshops, conducting trainings, and collaborating with other departments to embed gender-sensitive practices throughout the institution, ensuring sustainable progress.

Through this position, the office has successfully implemented awareness programs addressing sexual harassment and conducted workshops on gender equality that have reached a majority of the staff. However, a notable challenge arises from the fact that the gender focal person reports to the director responsible for Human Resources. Ideally, this role should be at a strategic level, such as a director, to ensure that gender-related strategies are enforced without delay. Elevating the gender focal person's position could enhance the effectiveness of gender initiatives and provide a stronger voice for women in leadership.

The Gender Policy

The OAG has also developed a comprehensive gender policy aimed at fostering a workplace free from discrimination and harassment. This policy recognizes that gender equality is essential for a fair and effective audit process, as well as for overall organizational success. The implementation of this policy has led to several positive outcomes:

- **Equal Opportunities in Recruitment:** The gender policy ensures that all individuals who qualify for positions within the OAG are recruited based on their merits, regardless of gender. This approach has resulted in equitable pay for all employees, contributing to a more just workplace. All interested individuals are encouraged to apply for vacant positions as well as females.
- **Training and Development:** The policy facilitates equal access to training, personal development, and career advancement opportunities for all staff members, regardless of gender. This inclusive approach not only fosters a culture of equality but also helps to build a diverse leadership pipeline. By actively empowering women to pursue leadership roles, the organization ensures that a variety of perspectives and experiences are represented in decision-making processes. This commitment to diversity ultimately enhances organizational effectiveness and innovation, creating a more dynamic and resilient workforce.
- **Supportive Work Environment:** By creating an inclusive and supportive work environment, the OAG fosters a culture where all employees feel valued and empowered to contribute to the organization's goals. This commitment to inclusivity encourages collaboration and innovation, allowing diverse perspectives to shape decision-making. As a result, employees are more engaged, motivated, and likely to take ownership of their work, ultimately driving the organization toward greater success and effectiveness in achieving its objectives..

Gender Responsive Audit Guidelines

Recognizing its responsibility to make a positive impact on the lives of citizens, the OAG has developed gender-responsive audit guidelines. These guidelines are utilized by auditors for all clients, ensuring that audit recommendations consider gender implications. By integrating gender perspectives into audit processes, the

OAG is taking significant steps toward influencing the policies and practices of its clients.

This initiative is particularly important as it not only promotes gender equality within the OAG but also encourages clients to adopt similar practices. The long-term goal is to create a ripple effect that enhances gender equality across various sectors and institutions in Zimbabwe.

Gender-Based Budgeting

The implementation of a **gender budget system** within the OAG is another crucial opportunity for promoting gender equality. This system takes into account the needs of staff members while considering gender issues. It allows for oversight of the budget with a focus on gender sensitivity, ensuring that resources are allocated equitably.

For instance, the gender budget system mandates that gender sensitivity programs are included in the budget, thereby guaranteeing that financial resources are directed towards initiatives that promote gender equality. This proactive approach not only enhances the internal workings of the OAG but also sets a precedent for other organizations to follow suit.

The gender based budgeting system has aided the SAI to ensure that female leaders are not left out of programs or opportunities because they may be breastfeeding and cannot travel with an infant and maid. The SAI has made it possible for breastfeeding leaders to travel with their infants thereby ensuring female leaders do not lose out on any developments.

Challenges to Female Participation in Leadership

Despite the numerous opportunities for enhancing female participation in leadership positions, several challenges persist.

Male Domination and Resistance to Female Leadership

The accounting field, like many others, is traditionally male-dominated. This environment often presents significant challenges for women aspiring to leadership roles. Female leaders frequently encounter resistance from male colleagues, who may be reluctant to accept direction from women, particularly if they are younger or less experienced.

For example, personal experiences reveal instances where female leaders, including myself, have faced difficulties when leading male colleagues who are older. Assigning duties to these individuals often results in justifications for their inability to complete tasks, accompanied by excuses that reflect a lack of respect for female authority. This resistance not only undermines the confidence of women in leadership positions but also perpetuates a culture of gender bias within the workplace.

Competing Work and Home Responsibilities

Another significant challenge for women in leadership roles is the struggle to balance work and home responsibilities. Women often bear a disproportionate burden of domestic duties, which can hinder their ability to fully engage in their professional roles. This balancing act can lead to increased stress and burnout, ultimately impacting their performance and career advancement.

Females tend to shy away from leadership roles because of their various responsibilities and the fear that they may not be able to succeed due to these competing responsibilities.

The expectation that women should excel both at work and in their personal lives creates a dual pressure that can be overwhelming. This challenge is compounded by societal norms that often prioritize male leadership, leading to additional scrutiny of female leaders' capabilities and decisions.

Engagement with External Parties

Engaging with external parties can also present challenges for women in leadership positions. In many cultures, there is a prevailing expectation that leadership should be male-dominated, which can create obstacles for women who seek to establish their authority and credibility. This societal bias can result in women being underestimated or dismissed in professional settings, making it difficult for them to build the necessary networks and partnerships that are crucial for effective leadership.

For instance, female leaders may face skepticism or lack of respect from male counterparts, which can undermine their authority. Stereotypes about women's capabilities can lead to disputes over their decisions, including audit reports. Miscommunication or lack of effective dialogue can exacerbate disputes, making it harder to reach conclusions. Male-dominated environments may foster a culture where women's voices are less heard or valued. These issues will always impact on the female leader's performance as it will result in delays in concluding audits due to disputes that may affect organizational efficiency and accountability.

Strategies for Overcoming Challenges

To address these challenges and enhance female participation in leadership positions, several strategies can be implemented:

Mentorship and Sponsorship Programs

Establishing mentorship and sponsorship programs can provide women with the guidance and support they need to navigate their careers successfully. By connecting aspiring female leaders with experienced mentors, organizations can help women build confidence, develop their skills, and expand their professional networks. This is what the 'women in leadership' program does to female leaders. If the program could be cascaded to many female leaders, the impact would be enormous and beneficial.

Training and Development Initiatives

Organizations should invest in training and development initiatives that specifically target women. These programs can focus on leadership skills, negotiation techniques, and conflict resolution, empowering women to take on leadership roles with confidence. Additionally, providing training for all staff on gender sensitivity can foster a more inclusive workplace culture.

Promoting Work-Life Balance

Organizations can implement policies that promote work-life balance, such as flexible working hours and parental leave. By creating an environment that supports employees in managing their personal and professional responsibilities, organizations can help reduce the burden on female leaders and encourage greater participation in leadership roles.

SAI Zimbabwe allows for a paid maternity leave, however, there is need to also have a paid paternity leave for males to encourage the males to tend and care for the little ones.

Advocacy for Gender Equality

Advocating for gender equality at all levels of the organization is crucial for creating a culture that values diversity and inclusion. Leadership should actively promote gender equality initiatives and hold staff accountable for fostering an inclusive work environment. This commitment can help dismantle the barriers that hinder women's advancement in leadership.

Conclusion

The journey toward greater female participation in leadership positions within SAI Zimbabwe is fraught with challenges, but it is also filled with opportunities for growth

and change. By implementing strategic initiatives focused on gender equality, organizations can create a more inclusive workplace that empowers women to take on leadership roles. As Zimbabwe continues to strive toward its goal of becoming a prosperous and empowered upper middle-income society by 2030, the active participation of women in leadership will be essential for achieving sustainable development and fostering a more equitable society.

Addressing gender dynamics in male-dominated settings requires a multifaceted approach that includes training, policy changes, and fostering a culture of respect and inclusion. By implementing these strategies, organizations can support female leadership and improve overall effectiveness in their operations.

Through collective efforts, advocacy, and a commitment to change, we can pave the way for future generations of female leaders, ensuring that their voices are heard and their contributions are valued in the pursuit of governance, accountability, and progress.