

# Determinants of under-representation of women on Boards of Directors: an exploratory study of African public and private firms<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The underlying causes for the low representation of women on board directorships has been the subject of considerable research when viewed in the context of North American, European and Asian economies and markets. In Africa, very few studies exist that examine this reality even if the socio-economic situation increasingly requires it. Indeed, women are a pillar of the social and economic life of African countries, as they constitute the equilibrium point of family stability and contributors to various essential economic activities alongside men in their community and country. This central role of African woman in all civic endeavours stands in stark contradiction to their general absence on the Board of Directors of most African companies. Although a recent ADB study indicates that the percentage of African women on boards is higher than on some other continents' nonetheless, the fact remains that this low representation is astonishing. This research aims to understand the cause and effect relationship and to identify the determinants of this low representation of women as sitting board members. It is based on semi-structured interviews with women who are voting members on existing Boards of Directors of large firms in the public and private sectors. It shows that the low representation of women in boardrooms is explained more by socio-cultural factors rather than any organizational flaws or personal issues with these women.

**Keywords:** Board of Directors, presence of women, leadership, socio-cultural factors, developing countries.

**JEL codes:** M13, M14, O31, O32.

## Introduction

The representation of women on Boards of Directors is an important issue because it increases the source of qualified human resources' thus, contributing

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to increased competitiveness among firms (European Union, 2016; Catalyst, 2011, 2015; Davidson & Burke, 2000) and because it also helps in changing attitudes about the role of women in the upper echelons of power. Research on diversity in the composition of board members has been increasingly studied in the last decade (Woetzel et al., 2018; St-Onge & Magnan, 2013; Joy, 2008). Many of these studies have focused on examining the role of women on these boards and their impact on organizational performance (Harjoto, Laksmana, & Lee, 2015; Adams, Haan, Terjesen, & Ees, 2015; Adams & Ferreira, 2007, 2009; Burgess & Tharenou, 2002; Smith, Smith, & Verner, 2006; Carter, Souza, Simkins, & Simpson, 2003; Daily, Certo, & Dalton, 1999; Farrell & Hersch, 2005). Other studies have focused on the lack of women sitting as members of the Boards of Directors (Cabrera-Fernandez, Martinez-Jimenez, & Hernandez-Ortiz, 2016; Adams & Ferreira, 2007, 2009). Also, significant efforts related to the participation of women in governance have been made by several countries (France, Norway, Canada and Spain, among others) for many years to increase their presence in various fields of activity (Post & Byron, 2014; Fondas & Salsalos, 2000). The Board of Directors (BOD) of a company is a body with a certain independence from its senior managers that defines the company's strategy and exercises control over the management of the company (Sun, Zhu, & Ye, 2015; Huse & Solberg, 2006; Lortie-Lussier & Rinfret, 2002).

Efforts to ensure better representation of women on BOD echo the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) proposed in 2015. Among other goals, they affirm the importance of *ensuring that women have equal access and participate fully and effectively in leadership roles at all levels of decision-making, whether in political, economic or public life (SDG 5)*. For example, in the US, women represent only 20% of corporate directorships listed on the US S&P 500 stock market index according to Bloomberg in 2016. In the European Union, only 21% of board members of listed companies are women, up 9.3 points since 2010 (European Union, 2016). Consequently, this has resulted in an underrepresentation of women even more pronounced at the level of board chairs. Only 3.6% of the largest publicly traded companies in the European Union had a female CEO, a stable figure over the past 3.5 years (European Union, 2016).

In Africa, the situation is not much different, as revealed in a recent study by the African Development Bank (2015). According to the African Development Bank (ADB), Africa is the developing region with the highest percentage of women on corporate boards, at 14.4% compared to 9.8% for Asia Pacific, 8.5% for Latin America and the Caribbean and 1% for the Middle East (Woetzel et al., 2018; African Development Bank, 2015). In addition, McKinsey, a strategy consulting firm, has released its 2016 report entitled *Women matter* on the presence of women in political and economic affairs in Africa. This report indicates that equality between women and men "still remains distant". It notes however, that women are more present on the boards of major African compa-

nies than in other parts of the developing world and that their role and functions in state owned companies and national parliaments has also improved. The studies by the ADB and McKinsey show that the situation of women on the Boards of Directors of large African companies is changing positively albeit slowly; however, they note that significant efforts still need to be made to reinforce this positive dynamic. This positive development hides regional and local disparities. The ADB study, for example, shows that, at the regional level, South Africa and East Africa account for 17.1% of women on Boards of Directors compared to 10.9% for West Africa and 7.3% for North Africa. The situation is even more worrisome in the countries situated in West Africa. In this zone, women represent only 5.1% of the Boards of Directors of large companies listed on the regional stock exchange (BRVM) of Abidjan (Côte-D'Ivoire). This under-representation of women on the Boards of Directors of large companies in West Africa is puzzling since we know that the governments of these countries as well as international organizations are making considerable efforts to promote equality between men and women (Boivie, Bednar, Aguilera, & Andrus, 2016; Khanna, Jones, & Boivie, 2014).

In this context, the main objective of this study is to understand this under-representation of women in decision-making bodies. More specifically, the aim is to identify the reasons why this under-representation of women exists on Boards of Directors; in order to understand how they advance to those coveted positions and their overall contribution to the company and society. More over, it is important to determine the means to implement a policy of ensuring a higher representation of women on the Boards of large West African companies.

The originality of this research lies in the fact that it aims to explore this situation in West Africa where little research, to date, has been conducted and published. Consequently, our results will add to the empirical work related to the under-representation of women and assist those who seek greater responsibilities as a member of the Board of Directors by presenting a clearer strategy on how to navigate the intricacies of the corporate world; thereby, achieving their objectives. In addition, the results should enable companies and public administrators to be better equipped to support women throughout this process.

## **1. Theoretical background**

Research on the under-representation of women in BOD is similar in methodology to studies conducted on how to understand the low participation of women in traditionally male jobs. In recent years, researchers have focused on measuring the impact of women's presence on Boards of Directors with respect to corporate performance (Roberts, McNutty, & Stiles, 2005; Sun et al.,

2015; Triana et al., 2013; Campbell & Minguez-Vera, 2008). Some others, have concentrated on measuring the influence, women exert as actual board members and the methods they use to fill an opening on a BOD (Hillman, 2015; Knockaert, Bjornali, & Erikson, 2015; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007). When viewed together, the studies show that organizational skills, personal attributes and socio-cultural factors explain the under-representation of women in Boards of Directors.

### 1.1. Organizational perspective

For the organizational perspective (Desrosiers & Lépine, 1991), the under-representation of women in boards of directors is explained by organizational practices that discriminate against them (Seierstad & Kirton, 2015; Gilligan, 1982). Based on the founding work of Kanter (1977), the organizational perspective is based on a social division of labor that gives different members of the organization different possibilities of access to sources of power and the benefits associated with their organization, and prestige associated with their numerical representation within the company (Milliken, Martins, 1996). Thus, the unequal distribution of groups creates a situation that disadvantages the minority in favor of the majority. In order to survive in their workplace, men-dominated women must adopt accommodation strategies, while imitating dominant role models to a certain degree (Zhang, Zhu, & Ding, 2013; Lyness & Thompson, 2000).

Hence the following research proposal:

**Proposal 1:** The organizational environment is predominantly male and women have more difficulty accessing positions on the Board of Directors.

### 1.2. Personal perspective

From a personal perspective, women's personal characteristics have an influence on their performance and career success (Gidengil & Vengroff, 1997; Desrosiers & Lépine, 1991; Ferguson, 1984). Research from this perspective (Moore, 1986; White, Cox, & Cooper, 1992, 1997) is based on the assumption that obstacles hindering the advancement of women are due to individual barriers, personality or lack of necessary skills (Finkelstein, Hambrick, & Cannella, 2009; Zhu, Shen, & Hillman, 2014). This perspective also suggests that the advancement of women in decision-making positions is more specifically related to their inability to use strategies to cope with all kinds of situations; for example, alliance building, the use of political skills and the readiness to take risks, etc. (Harel-Giasson, 1993; Maineiro, 1994; Simard & Tarrab, 1986). However, some studies claim that the Fortune 500 companies that had the greatest representation of women board directors had a higher return on investment, return on sales and return on equity (Adams, 2016; Catalyt, 2015; Guy, 1994).

For instance, those companies with the most women on their boards had a 66% higher return on investment than the companies with fewer women on their boards. Otherwise, in contrast to typical masculine environments driven by competition, individualism, hierarchy and technical outcomes, feminine values are commonly viewed as being based on mutual empowerment empathy and authenticity (Machold, Ahmed, & Farquhar, 2008; Dillard & Reynolds, 2008; Burke, 2003). The study of the difficulties of upward career advancement is not intended to challenge the status quo but rather to highlight the importance of training women to overcome certain shortcomings.

Hence the following research proposal:

**Proposal 2:** The personal characteristics of women (skills, abilities, lack of confidence) explain their low representation on Board of Directors.

### **1.3. Socio-cultural perspective**

The sociocultural perspective draws on the weight of tradition and cultural values to explain the low representation of women in decision-making circles, whether in politics or in business (Letza, 2017; Terjesen, & Singh, 2008; Brammer, Millington, & Pavelin, 2007). In Africa, the main factors invoked in existing literature to explain their political under-representation are physiological in nature, psychological, historical, socio-cultural and economic (Letza, 2017; Rouamba, 2011). In Africa, as elsewhere, the weight of biological determinants is still frequently mentioned to justify the hierarchy of the sexes (Compaoré, 2000). The historical explanation is also subject to controversy about the place occupied by African women today in the public domain. Several authors argue that women in pre-colonial African societies occupied a social position that deteriorated because of subsequent external factors, including colonization and a re-emergence of religious beliefs (Taylor, 2002). For example, notable African feminists of their day held in esteem were African females such as princesses Yennenga of the Moaga society of Burkina Faso, and Yaa Asantewaa, queen mother Ashanti (Ghana) who all reportedly opposed British rule and Kimpa Vita, better known by the name of Dona Béatrice, who opposed Portuguese colonialism are now conveniently forgotten (Rouamba & Descarries, 2010). The low participation rate of women on boards today can be explained by the renewal of socio-cultural inequities such as (i) the sexual division of labor, (ii) obstacles introduced because of economic constraints including insufficient income and (iii) institutionalized constraints legitimized by a legal and legislative system that sanctions and renews the subordination of women (McKinsey, 2016).

From this follows the following research proposal:

**Proposal 3:** Socio-cultural barriers faced by women explain their low representation on Boards of Directors.

## **2. Research methodology**

A qualitative research methodology was deemed best suited to the objectives identified at the onset of this study. Outraged, the inconclusiveness of prior quantitative research on underrepresentation of women on boards is the main factor that has led us to adopt a qualitative study (Cabrera-Fernandez, Martinez-Jimeniz, & Hernandez-Ortiz, 2016; Harjoto et al., 2015; Adams et al., 2015). This research is inductive in nature and aims to describe the point of view and the first-hand personal experiences of people directly related to our objectives. The data was collected from June 20 to July 8, 2017. It is important to note that before this data collection, we conducted an Internet search and benefitted from personal contacts so as, to make it possible to identify women members of various Boards of Directors in Burkina Faso.

Semi-structured interviews of an average duration of 45 minutes were conducted with women board members in both public and private companies (Yin, 2003). Equally important, the researcher attempted to select a sample group that fairly represented the realities on the ground with the individual women who were interviewed by accounting for their respective experience as BOD members, the size of the BOD and the social background of the participants. In particular, the researcher wanted to learn especially from women sitting on BOD exactly what methods they used to gain access to upper management (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We also looked at the cases of women wanting to become members of the board but who could not. Lastly, in the absence of female BOD presidents, we interviewed two male BOD presidents to find out why there were so few women seated at the table as members of the BOD and especially why there was a complete absence of women as BOD presidents. In total, we interviewed 8 female BOD members and 2 male BOD presidents. The women we interviewed were between 40 and 50 years old and of Burkinabe origin. All of these women have a university education, with more than half having completed their studies in management or economics. They are all married and have children. These BODS are generally composed of between 10 to 15 people. Political influence in the nominating and appointment process is also an important element to consider when selecting board members.

## **3. Results and discussion**

The results of our research provide the explanations for the low presence of women on the BOD of large companies in Burkina Faso. They show that while the organizational and personal perspectives explain in part the low presence of women on the BOD, the socio-cultural perspective appears to be the most important factor in impeding women's access to directorships.

*Does the organizational perspective explain the low presence of women on BOD in Africa?*

Among the organizational obstacles related to the low presence of women on BOD, the male environment of African organizations and the domination of men in decision-making positions are among the reasons that explain the low presence of women in BOD. One of the participants confirms: "Here it is men who dominate. They make up less than 50% of the staff, but they occupy all managerial positions. At first, the board was made up exclusively of men and when I was named, some were suspicious thinking that I was co-opted... with the mission to monitor them!"

This situation is accompanied by a glass ceiling... Indeed, the women members of the BOD agree that the responsibilities and titles to which they aspire, some would say entitled, are capped and very few of them ever manage to break this ceiling. One of them states: "There is no woman who is the president of a BOD in this country, yet women are as competent as men. We manage differently but that does not mean that we are not competent. In Africa, women occupy a central place in the family and this requires them to manage the family budget and make decisions in the absence of men. Our approach is more consensual while the men are more confrontational."

In the research on the presence of women in BOD, it becomes readily clear that women experience that same fate as their counterparts in the industrialized world, namely the effects of the "Old Boys Club" (Miller, Triana, 2009; Strøm, D'Espallier, Mersland, 2014). These studies show that BOD remain the last bastion of male power because historically it is men who have always been appointed to these positions (Strøm et al., 2014; Jackson, Joshi, & Erhardt, 2003). Thus, BOD are seen as some places of power and to access them, it is important to mobilize various networks that only men can develop. Men are less inclined to integrate into professional networks because it is perceived by society as inappropriate and contrary to the position of women (Jackson, May, & Whitney, 1995; Westphal & Milton, 2000). As the work of Watson, Kumar and Michaelsen (1993) indicates, women with strong character and behavior like men are severely sanctioned by society. A woman must be docile, timid and subject to male authority (Rose, 2007). One participant, responsible in a state-owned enterprise, summarizes the situation: "I manage a team of more than 50 employees. When I was appointed to this position the men welcomed me and made a commitment to be loyal to me. It did not last long!!! Sometime later, I asked one of my colleagues to replace me for a few days because I was going on a mission. He accepted with pleasure. When I returned, I found many instances of daily tasks that were not done on time. I called him and asked him to account... He insisted that his work was perfect and that he managed the service well in my absence. I had to affirm my authority... and it did not please him!!!! He told me that I owed him more respect because he had a woman like me at home who was submissive."

BOD in Africa are considered places of power with considerable in-fighting and only the strongest prevail. However, women are perceived as fragile, emotional and unable to lead in male environments and make the difficult decisions (Darmadi, 2013). Some studies also suggest that even if women are competent, it becomes a question of social acceptability. Thus, BOD avoid naming women to conform to societal reality. In African businesses, power is not generally shared (Bourgoin, 1984). It is often an absolute power and it is held by a leader (usually a man) who reigns without sharing and systematically eliminates those who might challenge him (Bourgoin, 1984; Kessy, 1998).

*Do the personal characteristics of women explain their weak presence on the BOD of African companies?*

Among personal characteristics, women's supposed lack of competence is most often mentioned. While they attend the same university institutions as men, they are most often accused of being incompetent by the governing bodies of African companies. One of them states: "I have a Postgraduate Diploma (DESS) in Economics with over twenty years of work experience. However, I still have to prove myself to men. I am asked more questions about my reports and other communications than my male colleagues. If I am not clear on one point, I may be asked to return to work or to be offered the support of a male colleague to review the work. Each time I make them understand that I am up to it and that work does not scare me!! To succeed, one must be reckless, determined and sometimes brash and arrogant."

The women surveyed indicate that they stand out for their charisma, leadership and interpersonal skills vis-à-vis their male counterparts. Overall, they reveal extraordinary resilience. According to them, to succeed, women must learn to handle the stick and the carrot better than men do. One woman gave the following example: "I handle the stick more than the carrot in my responsibilities. At first, I played with my femininity to try to resolve differences and conflicts that arose. I quickly learned that the kindness of a woman is perceived as a weakness, a fragility. After I understood that, I wore my other hat in front of the staff. And I was ruthless!!! The men were scared and followed everything I said to the letter. At one point, I pitied them, but I continued on and did not fall back on my former kindness."

Women who have personal connections with influential members of the BOD or local/national politicians are a considerable asset when seeking a directorship. Former classmates who have been promoted are also strong assets for a BOD appointment. One of the participants was the beneficiary of a colleague who had been promoted to, ironically, the role of a supervisor in a ministry who had jurisdiction in her case: "Yes, I studied with him in the 1980s. We lost contact with each other and surprise, he ultimately became a minister and proposed my nomination. People thought that we had more than a friendly relationship, incorrect as usual. Since then, whenever I encounter a difficult situation I contact him and he gives me his best advice."

Outside the tightly closed circle of politicians, there is also the importance of the surname for those seeking access to a BOD. If women have a well-known name in the political and economic spheres of the country, their access to BOD becomes much easier. Mrs. Ouedraogo, from a family of well-known businessmen of the country reveals: "I am a member of several boards because of my father. As he is well known in political and economic circles, I am regularly offered such positions on various board of directors. People offer me these positions so that I may someday help them to access my father. They all want to take advantage of my father's address book locally and internationally."

*Do socio-cultural factors explain the low presence of women on the BOD of African companies?*

Practicing an accepted religion can help considerably a woman who seeks an appointment to a boardroom. In a country where religion is omnipresent, a woman who does not regularly practice a religion will not easily gain access to a position of responsibility or a place on a board of directors. Paradoxically, religions contain certain precepts that tend to encourage the submission of women to men. Some religions consider that the role of the woman is to take care of her house and the education of the children. They must not be absent from the house for a long time. These constraints are incompatible with a presence on a BOD that often requires very long working hours and recurring stressful moments. This explains why some women refuse to sit on board meetings. In addition, the pressure by the male spouse discourages a woman who aspires to such opportunities. Some spouses demand total submission of the woman and even require to be consulted before a possible appointment to a position of responsibility. One of them says: "My husband has twice refused to allow me to be nominated to a position of responsibility. As you know, the tradition at home requires the authority to inform the husband (head of the family) of any potential appointment of his wife. The first time, he mentioned his frequent business trips that required me to be more present at home and the second time, he suggested that family constraints (the fragile health of my mother-in-residence) required her to decline the offer of appointment. Even if these reasons are partly true, deep inside me I know that my husband does not want my professional and economic situation to be better than his. You know, women are also submissive because men deny them power and financial independence."

The weight of tradition in the country partly explains the low presence of women in BOD. Living in Africa means belonging to mostly patriarchal groups or societies where men are considered more important than women (Rouamba, 2011). During the pre-colonial period, men were the guarantors of stability and the preservation of the values and secrets of society. Women were not worthy to be trusted because marriage could keep them away from their social group or family (Rouamba, 2011; Compaoré, 2000). The postcolonial period has not fundamentally changed the role of women; they are still considered a "foreign-

er” because in a joint family setting they are forced to ally with another family. As a result, men were encouraged to go to school while women were confined to family support roles (Bourgoin, 1984). All these traditional considerations heavily influence the life a woman will have in society and the treatment she will receive. They obtain respect and consideration because of their procreative capacity (Darmadi, 2013). Motherhood is an integral part of the DNA of women in Africa and is a source of social recognition. Thus, most of the women interviewed were all married and had an average of 3 children. As one of them recalls: “Of course, motherhood is important in the social recognition of a woman in Africa. If you take on responsibilities, the first thing men do is to ask, who are you? Are you are married? If yes, to whom? And if you have children? If all these conditions are met, you will be recognized and respected even before we analyze your technical skills. The responsible woman who is married and having children is most often accepted in institutions; they are affectionately called mom, sister or other caring nickname (if your husband has the same family name or ethnicity). It has also served me well because I can use my own name or that of my son, my husband, or my brother in order to facilitate communication.”

The results of our research show that the low representation of women on BOD of large African companies can be explained by organizational and personal constraints (Pande & Ford, 2011; Fondas & Sassalos, 2000). These results are therefore consistent with similar results achieved in numerous other countries (Garba & Abubakar, 2014). They confirm that organizations are a male dominated environment and that the supposed lack of self-esteem, whether real or imagined, explains their low representation in corporate decision-making circles (Galbreath, 2011). However, the situation is slowly changing in many Western countries (Norway, Canada, and France in particular) due to the adoption of specific laws imposing female representation in large firms (Shafique, Idress, & Yousaf, 2014). In African companies, our results show that beyond the organizational and personal aspects, the low representation of women in BOD can be explained by the important weight attributed to tradition and religion (Rouamba & Descarries, 2010; Kessy, 1998). Indeed, traditional African society has mainly reserved for women the role of procreation and domestic family occupations (Bourgoin, 1984). Giving life gives the woman recognition and status, because it helps to ensure the sustainability of the extended family. Even in many villages today, the practice of polygamy continues and the girl can be, against her will, given as a wife to join a new family unit. As a result, the woman is inclined to develop feelings of reserve and an attitude of withdrawal towards her home and her children (Compaoré, 2000).

But as many authors have shown, the African woman has always been enterprising and determined to contribute economically to the functioning of the family environment (Kamdem & Ikelle, 2011). As Hampâté-Ba described it: “Everywhere she went, my mother had managed to develop a fairly large

trade in various regional fabrics and articles.” An important consequence of modernity is to upset the sexual division of roles established by traditional society. Thus, as recent studies by ADB and McKinsey show, women are improving their presence in decision-making bodies of large African companies (African Development Bank, 2015; McKinsey, 2016). In the villages, they are increasingly refusing the practice of polygamy imposed by their religion or tradition and are more involved in the creation of business enterprises (Austin, 1990; Young, 1994). Consequently, many studies show that women are more likely than men to create microenterprises (Tchouassi & Nosseyamba, 2011). Similarly, in universities and business schools, women are more likely to pursue higher education than men (Ouedraogo, 2003). African companies will no longer be able to ignore these fundamental changes that are transforming its socio-cultural environment. The empowerment of women in business workplaces not only unleashes previously underused human potential, but is also a positive factor for social change as it shifts societies’ traditional conceptions of authority and the division of labor (Kessy, 1998). Stronger participation of women in the decision-making bodies of African companies is beneficial for both women and men. Women generally display a fierce determination to be successful and they want to demonstrate their ability to lead. Similarly, men wish to contribute more to the family finances because they would find it shameful, according to traditional ways, to have women earn more at work that in turn could be seen as shortcomings on their part (Rouamba, 2011; Compaoré, 2000).

## **Conclusions**

Our research was intended to identify the determinants for the low participation rate of women on the Boards of Directors of the largest private and public companies in Burkina Faso. The literature teaches us that organizational factors, along with personal and socio-cultural issues are at the heart of the low representation of women on various boards of these organizations. Our results show that although the situation of women in BOD is generally improving in Africa, the socio-cultural factors remain as the principal obstacle responsible for the low participation rate of women seeking board directorships. The role of women is still constraint by tradition and issues of religion, among other variables. However, our research is limited by our sample size and its local scope. From this perspective, any future research should be conducted with a larger sample size in different locations. Moreover, some research questions have been raised by our study: What is the role of the chair in perpetuating barriers to gender diversity? What is the role of corporate charters in promoting gender diversity? or cultural institutions role in promoting women on the Boards of Directors in African companies?. This would be a logical extension of this study.

Finally, we see that elsewhere, on other continents, the situation of women on boards has improved considerably following the adoption of laws that require companies of a certain size to comply with quotas for women. In Africa, we know very few countries that have adopted such ways and means. It will be interesting to see if the governments of African countries also legislate in this direction.

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