**Okelian doings: A champion of Gender Equality**

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**Abstract**. The current paper elaborates on the conceptual space of champions of gender equality. To do this, we analyze the doings of one leader, Mary Okelo, using an interview she gave to the Creating Emerging Markets project at Harvard Business School. We uncovered three overarching dimensions which represent the work of gender equality champions: depth of embracement, scope of embracement, and leverage of engagement. Our findings are integrated with current research related to organizational champions. Results show that gender equality champions build structures, policies, and processes benefiting all organizational stakeholders and their communities.

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In alignment with the 2020 conference theme of social sustainability, the goal of this stream is to reflect on social sustainability as it relates to gender equality. By mapping the knowledge gained in this field, we hope to inform organizational practices and policy-making. We refer to social sustainability as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). One aspect directly related to social sustainability is gender equality, as it comprises one of the 17 United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (i.e., SDG; United Nations, 2018). Building on Article 1 of the 1948 Declaration of human Rights (<https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>), which states that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights,” we consider gender equality a basic human right and a fundamental component of social sustainability.

As part of a comprehensive stakeholder-based approach, the United Nations’ 17 SDGs in general and SDG5 in particular call for a brighter future for all (van Tulder, 2018; van Zanten & van Tulder, 2018). Organizational scholars have much to contribute to this quest. Stakeholders around the world are joining efforts to increase gender equality across countries. To paint a picture of the magnitude of this challenge, consider the estimate made by The World Economic Forum that it will take 208 years to level the playing field across genders. Given the magnitude of this challenge, the United Nations included gender equality as one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals to be reached by 2030. In addition, many non-profit organizations are joining this quest to increase gender equality. For example, very recently Melinda Gates announced an investment of 1 billion dollars for this purpose (<https://time.com/5690596/melinda-gates-empowering-women/>). In summary, gender equality matters and MNEs as well as corporations in general have a responsibility to contribute to the achievement of this goal.

As such, organizational researchers have steadily participated by developing theory and organizational practices that inform how to incorporate gender equality issues in the corporate agenda. These developments include, but are not limited to, gender equality policies and practices (Thompson, 2008), gender equality as culture (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004), and gender equality in corporate boards (Post & Byron, 2015). Although these issues evidence the complexity of gender equality in organizational settings, we need to develop clear theories and draft practical recommendations on how to transfer the feasible propositions into actual organizational interventions. One important aspect in this conversation is the gender equality champions, or advocates with enhanced credibility and positional power who actively promote gender equality in work settings (de Vries, 2015).

To our knowledge, only a few scholars have specifically discussed the role and characteristics of champions of gender equality in organizational settings (de Vries, 2015; Sawyer & Valerio, 2018; Wahl & Höök, 2007; Windscheid, Bowes-Sperry, Jonsen, & Morner, 2018). For example, de Vries (2015) built awareness of this topic in a qualitative study in which she analyzed four interviews across two institutions, a university and a police department. Wahl & Höök (2007) examined equality professionals in Sweden to find, among other key outcomes, a better understanding of gender equaliy among work groups and a professionalisation of gender equality in work settings. Recently, Sawyer and Valerio (2018) discussed gender equality champions from a male perspective by combining mentoring and a bias-free mentality, while commiting males to creating gender inclusive work settings. Although this work has opened a path for discussion about the role of gender equality in organizational settings, the characteristics and roles of gender equality champions remain topics for debate. In the current study, we set out to understand how the role of gender equality champions is enacted in organizations. We do this by examining how their individual behaviors crystallize into organiational practices, which can ultimately spill over to other organzations.

Beyond this attempt to examine champions of gender equality, much of what we know relates to champions in a variety of organizational domains including organizational ethics, human resources, organizational change, entrepreneurship, and innovation (Chakrabarti, 1974; Chen, Treviño, & Humphrey, 2020; Kanter, 1981; Maidique, 1980; Schon, 1965; Ulrich, 1997). These approaches to understanding champions in a variety of domains may contribute to shaping the conceptualization of champions of gender equality, particularly the enactment of this role.

The goal of this study is to conceptually examine champions of gender equality. For this purpose, we analyze one interview conducted with Mary Okelo by the “Creating Emerging Markets” project at Harvard Business School. The research question that guides this investigation is the following: What do gender equality champions do to enact this role?

**Methodology**

To answer our research question, we performed a qualitative analysis of one interview conducted with Dr. Elizabeth Mary Okelo. At the time the interview was conducted, she was the founder of Kenya Women Finance Trust and Makini Schools. Henry McGee, a professor of Harvard Business School and participant of the “Creating Emerging Markets” project at the same institution, conducted the interview on February 27, 2015 in Boston, Massachusetts.

To analyze this interview we followed Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton’s methodology (2013). We first conducted a first-order analysis by reading and coding main topics related to gender equality. The set of criteria to code these topics was broad. We coded anything related to gender (in)equality, including attitudes, behaviors, practices, policies, institutions advocating for gender equality, and federal regulations. Next, we conducted a second-order analysis, in which we re-labeled the lay terms in our first-order analysis into research-related terms. In this process, we cycled back-and-forth between emergent themes appearing during the second-order analysis and the relevant literature. For this purpose, two coders analyzed the interview and coded the passages related to gender equality separately. Coding disagreements were discussed until a consensual interpretation of the data was reached.

**Analysis**

For the purposes of showing how our data analysis progressed from raw data to our higher level abstractions, Table 1 shows the data structure, including 1st-order terms and 2nd-order themes and aggregate dimensions. Once we coded the raw data, we analyzed the first-order concepts theoretically, linking the raw data to the literature. Thus, we ‘stepped up’ (Gioia et al. 2013: 21) in the level of abstraction. This step resulted in nine second-order research-related themes. Grouping these nine themes culminated in three overarching dimensions: depth of embracement, scope of embracement, and leverage of engagement.

**Depth of Embracement**

As Table 1 shows, we found a set of actions enacted by Okelo with overarching themes (i.e., second-order themes), involving ability, motivation, and opportunity. These actions involved persistence to succeed, driving for justice, taking personal responsibility for the collective, confronting inequality, adapting to changing circumstances, balancing work and family, and seeking success to create opportunity for others. We examined these set of actions considering the ability-, motivation-, and opportunity-enhancing bundles as depicted in several diversity practices (AMO model; Jiang, Lepak, Hu, & Baer, 2012; Nishii, Khattab, Shemla, & Paluch, 2018). As explained by Jiang et al. (2012), each of these enhancing practices, although different from each other, all contribute to maximizing employees’ performance. Ability enhancing practices involve the development of employees’ skills. They include but are not limited to recruitment, selection, and training. Motivation-enhancing practices enhance employees’ motivation, such as developmental performance management, compensation, incentives, rewards, promotion, and career development. Finally, opportunity-enhancing practices empower employees to apply their skills to advance organizational goals. Examples of opportunity-enhancing practices include flexible job design, employee involvement, and information sharing. A key difference between the AMO diversity practices just explained and the first-order concepts as shown in Table 1 is that these first-order concepts are individual-enhancing actions instead of organizational-enhancing practices. However, as an individual agent of her organization, Okelo enacted actions that clearly relate to the three spheres of AMO. Let’s consider each of the three enhancing actions, starting with ability.

***Ability***. As examples of Okelo’s ability enhancing actions, consider the following two statements:

“*They did not know how to discuss their financial matters freely with a woman, so I had to devise different strategies for dealing with the different reactions from the different clients that came into the bank. It was challenging because back then there were no guidebooks for relationship banking*” (coded as “Adapting to circumstances”), and

“*We became friends and we got married there, and that wasn’t very amusing to the bank, because you see, they assumed that if I was going to be in the bank, maybe I was not going to get married*” (coded as “Balancing work and family”).

These statements reflect two examples of ability-enhancing actions because each involves the developing and application of Okelo’s skills to enhance her job performance. She was able to adapt to circumstances that otherwise would attenuate her performance as well as balance requirements from both family and work.

***Motivation***. Another set of examples points to motivation. Consider the following two examples:

“*And I think because I was so persistent, they said they would give me a try” (coded as “Persisting to succeed*,” and

“*I was so committed to the cause of women that the challenges didn’t matter*” (coded as “Driving for justice”).

The quotes above exemplify motivation-enhancing actions. The first quote points to the most typical characteristic of motivation, persistence (Kanfer, 1990). The second quote alludes to motivation as need, in this case for justice, while taking personal responsibility for a collective.

***Opportunity***. Now, consider the following statements:

“*If we did not excel, then other girls might not have their education invested in*” (coded as “Seeking success to create opportunity for others”) and

“*Yes, they said in the banking industry there were no women managers, so they couldn’t take me. Then I started to argue with them. I said ‘What? Why not?’ …*” (coded as   
“Confronting inequality”).

These statements reflect opportunity-enhancing actions because they advance employees’, and ultimately the organization’s, goals. The first quote points to advancing the opportunity to other women, generally. The second quote refers to advancing opportunities for the self.

Ability-enhancing, motivation-enhancing, and opportunity-enhancing actions are not mutually exclusive. As an example, let us consider seeking success to create opportunity for others. We coded this action as opportunity for both the individual actors and other women working for the organization. However, it can also relate to motivation because the pursuit of success relates to the need for achievement, a need-based motivation (Kanfer, 1990). Alternatively, adapting to changing circumstances can also relate to opportunity as adapting involves learning to deal with unexpected circumstances, which can generate future work opportunities. Therefore, the three dimensions we inferred relate to each other in some way and therefore they are not mutually exclusive.

*Depth of embracement****.*** We ultimately aggregated ability, motivation, and opportunity into an aggregate dimension, which we labeled depth of embracement. The connotation of depth of embracement captures the three second-order themes as three different, albeit related, pins inserted into the organizational structure and preparing/taming the terrain for equal opportunity for both women and men. These three elements of depth of embracement provide richness to the individual actions, configuring them as a whole articulated set, penetrating into the organizational structure. Therefore, we define depth of embracement as grasping ability-, motivation-, and opportunity-enhancing individual actions geared toward an equal playing field between women and men.

**Scope of embracement**

Table 1 also shows another set of actions enacted by Okelo, which we coded into three different, albeit related, second-order themes. These actions include advocating for women employees and customers, voicing women’s concerns, networking with women, building connections, engaging with national and international liaisons, mentoring women, and receiving and accepting social support. We grouped these actions into three second-order research-based themes: advocacy, network, and support. These themes are widely discussed in the diversity literature, particularly in relation to work discrimination generally and responses to discrimination in particular (Ibarra, 1992, 1993; Knapp, Faley, Ekeberg, & Dubois, 1997).

***Support***. Consider the following two statements pointing to support:

“*I saw the need to mentor and coach more women so that they can be decision-makers and executives at the bank*” (coded as “Mentoring”), and

“*What helped me was that my brother Hannington was working as a civil engineer in London at the time and he gave me a lot of moral support*” (coded as “Receiving social support”).

These actions reflect support through mentoring and essentially relate to providing wonderful opportunities for both learning and personal growth for the protégé, while also benefiting the mentor (Ragins, 2016). The second quote points to receiving support, in this case from a family member. Receiving social support can buffer the effects of discriminatory treatment and manage the costs related to negotiations for equal treatment, as experienced by Okelo (Major, Quinton, McCoy, & Schmader, 2000).

***Network***. We also found that Okelo’s actions involved the building of networks, or sets of nodes or ties (Brass, 2011) with clear network types, properties, and characteristics (Ibarra, 1993). Consider the following three examples:

“So what I did was start talking to them” (coded as building organizational connections)

“… *at the same time creating an environment within the bank, within which they [female customers] could come in and enjoy the services of the bank*” (coded as “Building organizational connections”), and

“*So he [managing director at Barclays Bank] was very supportive. He allowed me to attend international meetings relating to women issues*” (coded as “Engaging with national and international liaisons”).

These quotes exemplify the different types of networks built by Okelo, within and outside the organization. Indeed, Okelo not only built networks with employees and customers within her own organization, but she also undertook the creation of the Kenya Women’s Finance Trust. She also built international networks, for example by participating in the first United Nations Conference on Women which was held in Mexico in 1975, and by networking with the Women’s World Banking committee funded by Michaela Walsh. These networks facilitated the sensitization of gender inequality, resulting in a signed agreement between Women’s World Banking, Barclays Bank of Kenya, and Kenya Women’s Finance Trust. This agreement guaranteed loans to women without the collateral typically needed.

***Advocacy***. We also found Okelo an exemplar in advocating for women’s issues. We borrowed the term by Knapp et al. (Knapp et al., 1997), used in the context of sexual harassment, to define advocacy as seeking individual and organizational responses to remedy gender discriminatory treatment, particularly lack of opportunities. Consider the following quote:

“*Whenever I noted women who had leadership potential, I did not hesitate to draw the attention of the managers to these women”* (coded as “Advocating for women employees and customers”).

While working for Women’s World Banking in New York and being mentored by Michaela Walsh, Okelo worked to advance women’s work:

“*The empowerment of women is very important to me. It didn’t matter what challenges I was facing, so long as we were seeing that women were moving, were advancing, because I felt so strongly that women have so much to offer, and our countries were not doing so well because I think there was a resource there that was not being tapped into. And I felt that if women could be empowered and make a contribution, we would move forward*.” (coded as “Voicing women’s concerns”).

We coded these two quotes as advocacy as they go beyond working for advancing women’s status by inserting and building institutional responses and actions that ultimately increase the well-being of women around the world in general and in Kenya in particular.

*Scope of embracement****.*** We ultimately aggregated advocacy, network, and support into an aggregate dimension, which we labeled scope of embracement. Scope of embracement includes the three second-order themes as three different although related constructs. These three elements of scope of embracement provide the channels through which ability, motivation, and opportunity-enhancing actions transfer to others inside and outside organizational structures. Therefore, we define scope of embracement as grasping support, network, and advocacy to advance equal opportunities between women and men.

**Leverage of Engagement**

Table 1 shows various actions enacted by Okelo with the purpose of leveraging women’s well-being: strategy, power, and policy. By leverage we mean the pulling mechanisms used to advance women’s opportunities. These actions involve questioning the status quo, disrupting the status quo, sensitizing, claiming power, organizing action, and developing gender equality policies. I grouped these various actions into three second-order themes: strategy, power, and policy.

***Strategy***. Okelo advanced women’s opportunities by questioning and disrupting the status-quo. As an example, Okelo refers to the time in which she applied to Barclays Bank and was rejected. She overcame this rejection by questioning: “*Then I started to argue with them. I said, “What? Why not*?” and she continues:

*“They had these arguments that okay, in the event of a robbery, women panic. And I kept asking, in the event of a robbery, a man would stand there and wait for a gun to be shown?”*

Okelo disrupted the status quo by changing policies, processes, and procedures. Consider the following example in which Okelo provides access to financial services to women that otherwise would not have been entitled to financial resources:

“*I started questioning some of the laws and practices that prevented women from accessing banking facilities and credit. (…) So what I did [was] I just told the bank that we should have accounts for children. (…) So I used the children’s accounts to encourage women, knowing that it was likely to be women who would manage their children’s accounts.*”

The questioning and disruption of the status quo resembles what Radoynovska (2018) considers procedural discretion work, which involves questioning the application of rules and allocation of scarce resources, and symbolic discretion work, which involves the assessment of those to whom resources should be allocated. Both procedural and symbolic discretionary work refers to efforts to circumvent organizational rules in order to prevent the unequal treatment of clients. In Okelo’s case we found that she circumvented rules not only for clients but also for employees.

***Power***. Okelo also sensitized undervalued female employees to inequality and claimed power in the face of discrimination. For example, consider the following two excerpts:

*“There were no women in managerial positions. (…) So what I did was to start talking to them. (…) I started to sensitize them to their situation.”*

*“They ask for the manager, and then they said, “Where is the manager?” and I said, “I am [the manager].” They would still ask where the manager was, because I think they always assumed that if you are a woman, you are a secretary, not the manager.*

*How did you deal with that personally?*

*I stood my ground. And when they came, I just said, ‘I am the manager, I am here to help you’.”*

The first quote portrays how Okelo built awareness in female employees and prepared them to access better work opportunities. The second quote refers to how Okelo conveyed power when discriminated against by customers as perpetrators of discrimination. Both types of actions accrued power, which we defined as “the basic energy needed to initiate and sustain action, or, to put it another way, the capacity to translate intention into reality and sustain it” (Bennis & Nanus, 1985, as cited in Pfeffer, 1992, p. 32)

***Policy***. The final theme related to leverage of embracement is policy, which we found rooted in organizing action and developing gender equality policies. For example, in response to seeing capable female employees undervalued as cashiers, tea girls, or cleaners, she formed Barclays Bank Women’s Association. Now, consider the following example in which Okelo actively built a policy regulating all African countries:

*“… what African Development Bank wanted –one of the things that I needed to do there [Ivory Cost], was to work on the women and development policy paper for the fifty-three African countries. Because they didn’t have a policy document that could guide them. Getting the document approved was most challenging because not all policymakers were in favor. It took a lot of lobbying and strategizing to see it through. (…) And I was happy that we got the policy paper and the African countries had at least that document that would guide them in their projects and programs, so that women’s needs would be taken care of.”*

The first example relates to organizing action, collective advocating for the rights of women in the workforce. The second example strikingly points to how Okelo contributed to developing a gender equality policy applicable across African countries. These actions take place at different levels of analysis. The first example shows Okelo’s action within Barclays. The second example, points to actions involving the entire African continent. Both examples convey the shaping of policy; the first one in a single organization; the second one across all the African countries.

*Leverage of engagement*. We include strategy, power, and policy as the content domain of leverage of engagement, or the pulling mechanisms enacted to shape procedures and policies applicable not only at the organizational level but also in countries around the world.

**Discussion**

In this piece, we analyzed one of the most important figures advocating for women’s rights around the world: Mary Okelo. In analyzing just one interview, we found that Okelo’s actions shape the meaning of champion of gender equality consisting of three domains: depth of embracement (including ability, motivation, and opportunity), scope of embracement (including advocacy, network, and support), and leverage of embracement (including strategy, power, and policy).

Depth of embracement, or the grasping of ability-, motivation-, and opportunity-enhancing individual actions geared toward an equal playing field between women and men, mostly centered on the individual, seems to engine and cement the basis for the other two dimensions. Scope of embracement, displayed at the dyad, group, organization, nation, and international level, relates to the contextual range, breadth, compass, or reach of Okelo’s actions toward others (Gerring, 2001). Leverage of embracement, or the pulling mechanisms used to advance women’s opportunities, which operates mostly at the organization, national, and international levels, roots the aspirations and dreams into strategy, power, and ultimately policy-making. The three domains are highly interrelated. We can argue that as the engine, depth of embracement, fuels scope and leverage of embracement. At the same time, scope and leverage of embracement energize depth of embracement by nurturing new ideas and dreams shared by new networks and polices (see Figure 1).

These ideas have theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the model, inductively built based on Okelo’s actions, should be compared with other models of champions, such as ethical, human resources, organizational change, entrepreneurship, and innovation champions (Chakrabarti, 1974; Chen et al., 2020; Kanter, 1981; Maidique, 1980; Schon, 1965; Ulrich, 1997). Future research may establish the similarities and differences in champions across these different domains. Practically, the analysis of this case provides examples of actions that Chief Diversity Officers or other lower level diversity executives may implement in the management of workforce diversity.

We hope that this study contributes to the discussion on what and how organizations can implement gender diversity policies, processes and practices at work. Champions of gender equality go beyond human resource champions by focusing what can be done to fairly integrate 50% of the workforce around the world.

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Table 1: Data Structure

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| First-order Concepts | Second-order Themes | Aggregate Dimensions |
| Adapting to circumstances  Balancing work and family  Persisting to succeed  Driving for justice  Confronting inequality  Seeking success to create opportunity for others | Ability  Motivation  Opportunity | Depth of Embracement |
| Advocating for women employees and customers  Voicing women’s concerns  Building organizational connections  Engaging with national and international liaisons  Mentoring women  Giving and receiving social support | Advocacy  Network  Support | Scope of Embracement |
| Questioning status quo  Disrupting the status quo  Sensitizing  Claiming power  Organizing action  Developing gender equality policies | Strategy  Power  Policy | Leverage of Embracement |

Figure 1: Model of Champion of Gender Equality