Women in Top Leadership Positions:  
Their Challenges, Contributions and Ambitions for the next Generation

Businesses today are proving quite challenging, yet ever evolving, with the advancement of technology, innovative opportunities and complex global interactions. These challenges require diverse approaches in terms of perspectives and experiences. This entails recognizing the importance of including more women in leadership positions and roles. Studies have shown time and time again that creating an environment with a focus on supporting, advancing and retaining women, and allowing them to thrive and practice their potential is good for business. Having more female leaders and bridging the gap of gender division in leadership would bring new ways of operating and more insight to organizations (Lahti, 2013). Hence businesses should strive to consider the challenges women face when trying to climb the corporate ladder and foster means to reduce the obstacles specific to women through trainings and supportive coaching initiatives.

The concept of leadership comprises of people, goals and influence; leadership is influential actions used to achieve goals, it is people-driven and it is the ability to inspire people to help achieve the set goals of an organization (Daft et. al, 2010). Seeing that leadership as a concept can be very broad, female leadership should be considered and approached as one type of leadership style, one that should be recognized as very much valuable to today’s organizations.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2011), although the proportion of women in the workplace has increased remarkably within the past few decades, women remain vastly underrepresented at the highest organizational levels. This is also very true in the Ethiopian context. Most writings mention that one of the main reasons that women are underrepresented in top leadership positions is because most people, both male and female, undervalue the effectiveness of a woman as a leader. This is partly due to the social role theory that argues that, based on an evolutionary sex-based division of labor, individuals develop gender role expectation of other’s behavior; associating men as breadwinners and women as homemakers (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012).

AWiB’s has put together this special Focus paper, to be done in parts, in alignment with its goal to promote women leadership and unleashing Ethiopian women’s potential. AWiB believes that one of the most powerful ways to inspire women to strive for leadership positions is to provide role models. History has obviously shown us through time that women have indeed faced more challenges in the workplace than their male counterparts. Women who have broken through the status quo and the barriers placed before them offer interesting insights into the personality of a successful woman, citing that social and emotional support are very helpful (Caliper, 2014; Moen, 2010). For this Part I of its report, AWiB approached four women in top leadership positions and asked them to share their stories of success, their daily struggles and overall challenges, and their hopes and messages to the coming generation.
Mrs. Azeb Asnake W/Kidan  
Chief Executive Officer – Ethiopian Electric Power

Raised in a family of nine other siblings, Mrs. Azeb was born in a small town called Robe, in Arsi. She and her family moved lot around the city of Arsi when she was growing up. Her father was a merchant of all trades and through time became a self-made government accredited judge by the time they moved to the capital city Addis Ababa, where she finished high school. She studied civil engineering at the technology department of the Addis Ababa University. She then received her second degree from Finland as a water resource engineer. Because of the proximity of the institution’s location and her position not having a lot of field opportunities, she said it was a relatively easy job that she enjoyed.

She began to realize that there were many projects coming into the country in the energy sector, all being run by men. She knew she wanted to be part of that movement and decided to go for it. Today as a Chief Executive Officer for the Ethiopian Electric Power Company, she is fulfilled knowing that her contribution to her community involves providing power to rural areas of Ethiopia with a specific female target. The mission and goal being that when homecare taking is made more easier for women, women can focus their extra energy on other external means of providing financial support to their families.

At the time she was married and with her two very young children. She said it was difficult to make the decision to go into the energy sector because she knew she would have to be away from home more often but also because she knew the challenges she would face being immersed in miles and miles of desert land with no quick and easy conveniences. Her initial fear was “Can I really handle this?”, “Am I ready to travel over 400km for work as required?”, “Is it right for me to be leaving my kids at such a young tender age?” She discussed the matter with her husband, renowned mining economist, Dr. Tibebe, and his first response was “Why then did you study all that you did, if not to go out there in the desolate areas to work?” One of her biggest supporters was her husband. He, not only encouraged her to take the position, but also agreed to help with the kids upon her absences with the position’s field trips. He did this in order to alleviate her concerns of leaving her family responsibilities in pursuit of her career. Her personal determination was also one her biggest motivating factors to push through her challenges and progress throughout her career and to the position she is in today.

Mrs. Azeb says that one factor to consider in minimizing the challenges that women face in the workforce is facilitating resources that help women with childcare. Daycare centers within organizations and allocating breastfeeding time should be considered for working women. She also stressed the fact that the society in general must begin to change their mindset on women and the societally and traditionally expected roles of women in our community. Mrs. Azeb lists one of her attributes as being an adamant learner, always willing to learn something new and putting effort in updating herself with current information and knowledge. She prides herself in always asking for and being able to take constructive criticism to better herself. She also says she is a patient woman and a social woman that enjoys working with her coworkers.
Her ambition for the next generation is to see a generation that is conscious to the internal struggles of women in the workplace; a generation that understands that women are burdened with a lot and must be appropriately supported in order to reach higher heights of their career paths. Mrs. Azeb would love to see the new generation be less money hungry and more purpose driven in terms of their goals in life. She wishes to see a generation that aspires to work hard towards achieving their dream with a focus on developing their career at large.

Mrs. Mekdes Mintesnot Abayneh
Chief Information Officer – Ethio-Telecom

Raised in a very hard working and diligent family, she learned a lot about responsibility and leadership at a young age as the eldest child of six in her family. She says she her late parents instilled in her self-belief, confidence and work ethics. Her father had a great vision that his daughters would break the glass ceiling that divides boys and girls in terms of educational and professional achievement. Now as a Chief Information Officer at Ethio-Telecom, she leads the information system division and the telecom expansion project in the information domain. She has served the company in different managerial positions in the information domain for the last 30+ years. She volunteers and participates in different events focused on experience sharing, especially to younger women to encourage more females to join the field of ICT and STEM, which are still both male dominated.

Mrs. Mekdes faced many challenges each and every step of her career path. She attains this to the fact that the industry was, and in so many ways still is, dominated by men with a lack of equal platforms for both sexes. She also added another challenging factor to be the lack of enough role models as well. She is certain that she took a longer time to reach a leadership position than her male counterparts. She believes that it is an individual’s capability of managing difficulty in an emotional intelligent way that makes all the difference in the road to leadership success, especially as a woman. With the support of her family and the values instilled in her growing up, she was able to accept that she had to work extra harder than her male colleagues just to prove her abilities and finally achieve her current position.

As a mother of four children, the challenge of balancing motherhood and work was not easy. Mrs. Mekdes believes that despite the taxing responsibilities of work it is important for a working mother to remember that the most important element to provide her children is the assurance of unconditional love on her part, regardless of her time restraints due to work. She says that the biggest challenge was balancing her time and energy in order to still do what was expected of her as a mother and a wife after work. Even though it was burdensome, the love and support she got from her husband made the journey bearable. She says she raised her children to her best abilities, nurturing and educating them and always consciously trying to instill in them the same values and principles as her parents had done for her and her siblings. She says she has and continues to inspire her children to be the best version of themselves.
She believes that one of the keys to overcoming challenges and achieving one’s goal is to absolutely love what you do and keep a positive attitude. She says she was able to excel to the level she is at due to her great composure and her deeply rooted love for her job and personally as a mother too. She stressed that her father had a big part to play in her confidence to believe she could do anything and become whomever she wanted to. As a woman, Mrs. Mekdes believes that she has had to be a little more selfless with her family and has managed to establish a positive environment both at home and at work.

Mrs. Mekdes deems that the lack of the presence of equal platforms for men and women has played a big part in hindering the confidence of women in the past. She thinks that a lot of the challenges she, as did other women, faced as a woman in a male dominated workforce could have been avoided if there were government policies that provided:

- Equal platforms for men and women.
- Longer maternity leave for women.
- Formal support network for experiences sharing with other women.
- Specific trainings given to men to understand the reality of women and the challenges they face at the workplace and how to consciously be aware of their attitudes and approaches to their female counterparts at work.

She characterizes herself as a calm, positive individual especially dealing with her challenges. Mrs. Mekdes says she is an honest, self-motivated woman dedicated to motivating others around her. Her message to the next generation and especially to young women is:

- Avoid fear. Don’t be afraid to fail. Don’t be afraid to learn from others and share your experiences, for that is the best way to grow and to broaden your knowledge.
- Efficiency is the key to success. Try to do as much as you can with the resources that have been provided to you.
- Try to balance your career with your social life. As a woman, you have to be able to do what’s expected of you in your work place, at home and in your community.
- Our attitude plays a major role in our day-to-day lives. The way we behave, the way we speak and how we dress will provide the best description of the person that we are and are striving to be. In addition to that, it also helps to build up self-confidence.
- Challenge the challenge. Do not let challenge stop you. Whenever there is a challenge, overcome it and tell yourself “I can make it”.
- Take courage to decide or take a risk. Whenever you have a tendency to hesitate or back off from a challenge, force yourself to go forward.

Mrs. Birtukan Abebe Fetensa
Owner & Managing Director – Penial Industry PLC

Born in Kemisse and raised in Addis Ababa, Mrs. Birtukan received her Statistics with a minor in Economics bachelor’s degree in Poona, India. She appreciates her father for instilling in her, her ‘can-do’ mentality. She believes that challenges are life experiences that strengthen one’s personal growth and should be considered as an opportunity for
improvement. The bigger the challenge, the bigger the opportunity for one to reach their next level of achievement; she says it’s all in how one chooses to see the path to success. As a businesswoman she says she has always met the challenges she was faced with as an opportunity to better her circumstances and gain even better results in general.

Mrs. Birtukan says she consciously makes sure to never stay too comfortable in any given situation in her life. She has always used her daily obstacles as a motivating factor in tackling her way throughout her career journey. Waking up to standard routine work without some sort of obstacles is what she considers boring and mundane. She stresses that society already undermines women’s leadership capabilities and as should be the more reason for a woman to be as bold as she can be.

The lack of equal and fair competition in the workforce, for women especially, is another factor she considers as challenging. It is already hard enough for a woman to have to work twice as hard to prove herself and then have to deal with corruption of which she has had to face in her line of work. Her road to success was long and involved a lot of risks and many conflicts with her competitors. She remembers times she was specifically targeted by her competitors that would purposely block her access to funds and finances and even go so far as harass her staff. Her personal agility and flexibility enhanced her leadership skills enough to handle situations such as those.

One of her attributes is her ability to consciously pay attention to her train of thoughts and maintain a clear state of mind in the midst of difficulties. Mrs. Birtukan says new challenges can not be solved with old thoughts and as such she always makes sure to keep an open mind in any given situation and as stated before tries to look at the problem from another angle in terms of solving the problem instead of dwelling on it. Her favorite quote is by James Allen, “As the plant springs from, and could not be without, the seed, so every act of man springs from the hidden seeds of thought”. She very much values people and loves to inspire and motivate others to test their capabilities and realize their full potential. She believes she has great communication skills which has had a positive impact on her path to success.

As far as contributing to her community, she is involved in various measures of development such as projects that create road access in remote areas, green area development projects, and even student summer camps’ sponsorships. She is currently working on realizing her dream to provide public restrooms as her contribution to creating a more green and cleaner Ethiopia. She plans to launch this project of hers by fully allocating the services to women specifically. She is presently in discussions with governmental sub city offices to help her facilitate land space, electricity access and the laying of water and sewage systems.

Her major ambition for the next generation is to see a generation that has is more involved in their communities. For young women especially, she stresses that women need to focus on working on themselves in all terms of self-development and to continuously push forward. Women are encumbered with a lot of identities they are expected to fulfill, without question, as expected by the society and as such should be
proud to already be leaders in their own right. She believes that in order to change the current context of the male and female inequality spectrum, not only in legal terms, but as societal perception and expectation, the next generation must work in building their communities by changing the mindset behind the whole matter at large.

Mrs. Ambanesh Kebede W/Kidan
Owner & CEO – Amba Pharmaceuticals

Born in a small rural town in Raya, called Dande, Mrs. Ambanesh was born to a family of ten siblings. She remembers always being fond of visitors that came to see the family in her village as a young girl. She says she always knew there was something bigger than her small surroundings and knew she was going to get out of where she was. Her older sister’s husband finally provided the opportunity for her to go to Addis Ababa, to complete high school. She then proceeded to receive her Pharmacy degree at the Addis Ababa University.

Her journey to success was not an easy one by far. She went through lot in her personal and professional life to get to the position of owning and running Amba Pharmaceuticals today, which is only one of the business endeavors she is involved in. She says that one of the most challenging aspects of her field of work was the beaurocracy that was very much present at the time of the pharmaceutical’s inception. Back then, about 20 years ago, the private sector for businesses had just been opened to the public and as such the governmental offices were not systematized conveniently enough, due to the lack of Ethiopia’s lack of experience at large. Her company was one of the first to apply for a business license and so was very new to the process that was also new to the country.

The lack of professional advice and consultancy did not make the process easy. There was also the matter of the banking system being hard on different levels, especially the access to finance. In addition to this, the personal stress of having moved her entire family from America to settle in Ethiopia was also taking its toll. Mrs. Ambanesh says that one of the most challenging aspects in terms of her personal life was the constant worry she went through as far as not having proper healthcare services and the quality of the educational system in the country at the time. She admits that she allowed the stress accumulate to physically harmful levels as far as the worry of providing these two for her very young children at the time.

Mrs. Ambanesh says that because a lot of her focus was on the issues of providing the standard quality of life she had envision for her children and family, the additional stress from opening up her own company, along with its obstacles was very taxing on her mentality and emotionally. She did however find a way to manage the stress by creating a support system, which consisted of a group of women of her age group, going through similar circumstances as she was. She said she used this support group to vent and share experiences as well as gain insight from their experiences as well. She also appreciates her husband for the support he provided her through her journey, not only emotional support but he also provided professional and specific advice and guidance in all the obstacles and challenges she faced.
She says a lot of the resources she wished she had back in the day that would have made
the path to her current position easier includes a better banking system, more professional
consultancy for the private sector in terms of attaining a business license, and especially
the lack of adequate technological communications systems. She remembers how
difficult it was for her at the time to communicate with her foreign suppliers because of
the Internet situation at the time. These are elements that she believes would have
elevated a lot of her stresses that would have in turn allowed her to better balance her
time management with work and family. Not only that, but this would have even further
progressed her business to higher heights than it currently is as well. She also
acknowledges that AWiB would have helped her tremendously had it existed at that time
in her life, as far as being a platform for her to network and gain experience sharing and
insights from other women in the same plight.

Mrs. Ambanesh contributes to her community in many ways one of which is providing
internship opportunities to college students and new graduates. She also provides a lot of
young individuals with access to education especially vocational trainings to those
without the means of affording it. She is also the first woman in Ethiopia to open a direct
sales company, called Prime Engudy DXN, which is a multilevel marketing company that
provides its customers a means of creating additional income to themselves through
organic product sales. She prides herself in the fact that this other business venture of
hers has and continues to provide financial stability to a lot of people in Ethiopia. One of
the aspects of Prime Enguday’s services is to provide inspirational, motivational, self-
development and overall wellbeing trainings and workshops to the public free of charge.

She says that her personal qualities include being honest and trustworthy, both attributes
that have allowed her to maintain her loyal customer basis and supplier relationship from
the very start of her pharmaceutical company to this day. She also says that she makes
sure to instill strong work ethics within her team of staffs at all her businesses. Mrs.
Ambanesh says that her core principle in life is to serve people. Providing service of
quality standard, she says, is what adds value to her life. She has always made an effort to
work on her self-development through many means, including reaching out for advice
and professional consultancy, and a lot of reading relevant materials to her business and
self-growth.

Her ambition for the next generation is for a generation that uses the opportunities given
to them, regardless of the condition and circumstance, to make something better of
themselves through hard work, discipline and self-belief. Her overall message to the
youth and females in general is to make a decision to change your situation if you do not
like where you are in your current state. The key is to look deep within yourself and be
conscious of your environment and of which company, in terms of positive influence and
support, you keep, to help you find inner peace and purpose in life.
Conclusion

Drawing from the interviewed women’s disclosures, it is clear to see the many similarities in the challenges they faced as working women who made it to top leadership positions. The women stated that the lack of equal opportunity in higher positions plays a big part in the minimal number of women in top leadership positions. We can conclude that the problem is not just on an organizational level but more so from the deep rooted societal expectations placed on women and their capabilities as leaders. Another striking similarity in the women’s revelations is the fact that the challenges faced were actually opportunities for personal growth and advancement in their given sectors of work. As Lyness & Thompson (2000) state, though double standards can produce barriers to women’s career advancement, there is also reason to believe that these double standards can provide a basis for an advantage for women leaders who reach the highest positions.

AWiB’s Women in Top Leadership Positions: Part I, Focus paper, was able to gain some insight from the above women who graciously gave their consent and time to contribute to the report. It is apparent to see that the most common challenge that they faced was the lack of support from organizations to realize that women need a little extra support in order to be able to balance personal responsibilities and workplace requirements properly. In addition to that, all the interviewed candidate stressed the need for women to invest in their self-development and leadership skills, which encompass working on self-reflection and self-confidence skills at large.

“The best success any of us can claim comfortably is to be comfortable in our own skin.”
Nahusenay Girma, AWiB Founder

References


### Interview Questions

1. What is your full name, age and job position?
2. Are you married and how many children do you have?
3. Briefly describe your background in terms of family, upbringing and education.
4. What challenges did you face on your path to your current position?
   - professionally in terms of your career
   - personally in terms of balancing your time with your family
5. How did you overcome these challenges?
6. What do you wish was available to you to better overcome these challenges?
   - in terms of resources, tools, support systems etc…
7. How do you contribute to your community?
8. What are your attributes?
   - in terms of qualities, values and principles etc…
9. What are your ambitions for the next generation?
   - what is your message to younger aspiring female leaders?