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When Will It Be Our Turn to Lead? An Evaluation of Women's Perceptions on Barriers to Access the Top Positions in Educational Institutions' Leadership in Kenya

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Promotion.

This study evaluated women's perceptions of barriers to accessing the top positions in organisations' leadership in Kenya. The study had 3 specific objectives: to determine the women leaders' perceptions of the barriers to accessing top organisational leadership in Kenya; to establish how much support women leaders get in their attempt to access top organisational leadership in Kenya; to investigate the barriers women leaders face in their attempt to access top organisational leadership positions in Kenya. The research was a descriptive study preferred because it provides a comprehensive and accurate picture of the study subjects and to describe the inherent relationships, patterns, and trends demonstrated by the data analysed. The study findings were: women progression to top offices has not been easy, for example over 55% of the female Deputy Principals had stagnated for over 10 years in the same position without promotion. According to the study, about 22% of the respondents blamed patriarchy and gender stereotypes for their lack of promotion. Finally, the study found that family roles remains critical for the respondents. For example, 44% feared that promotion may result being sent far from home, while 39% did not apply for promotions due to family roles.

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of women in leadership is not new; for instance, it has been trending at least since the 1960s in the United States of America (Wilkinson and Male, 2023). The current study seeks to determine the women leaders' perceptions of the barriers to accessing top organisational leadership in Kenya; to establish how much support women leaders get in their attempt to access top organisational leadership in Kenya; to investigate the barriers women leaders face in their attempt to access top organisational leadership positions in Kenya. Some of the concerns expressed by practitioners and researchers in relation to women's leadership include but are not limited to the desire and commitment to tap into the untapped potential of women and support them to assume positions of leadership, the need to make the playground even to attract more women in leadership in order to reduce the gap between female and male in top organisational positions (Dzimiri and Loyiso, 2022). Presently, women occupy 13% to 15% of the highest organisational leadership positions; finally, the need to support women leaders with a view of boosting their performances to assure the world that it is normal for women to sit at the helm of any organisation (Smith et al., 2013). Most of the empirical studies reviewed narrowly focused on the critical barriers affecting the attraction and progression of women leaders to reach the top organisational leaders. Failure to address the systemic barriers affecting women leaders means the entrenched organisational barriers will continue undiminished in the future (Lyness and Grotto, 2018). Traditionally, femininity was not positively acknowledged; rather, it was stereotyped. In that regard, women leaders were expected to show a high degree of dependence, submissiveness, and conformity (Wilkinson and Male, 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women Leaders Globally

Amongst some of the fastest developing countries, the emphasis is mostly on economic growth and performance; however, little is said

about the gender imbalance, which is underrepresented. For example, Asian countries have gained more attention for their sustainable economic development and, consequently growth (Himusic, 2022). However, the role development of women's leadership has not featured much. Due to gender disparity, male dominance in religious leadership and rigid cultural beliefs and practices, discrimination against women is high and becomes one of the barriers to women leaders to realise their full female potential. Without utilising fully the diversity of female potential, the realisation of a full transformation of society is impossible. Additionally, Singh (2022) concluded that

“... there... is nothing wrong with a woman who wants to control her home, be a strong leader, and win in all aspects of life. People should get rid of the idea that women cannot run organisations effectively. Women leaders have shown their ability to lead in a variety of situations in the past, and there are several examples to back this up. We are in the twenty-first Century, and everything around us is changing, from basic mechanisms to cutting-edge technology.”

The main argument here is that there is nothing that stops women from accessing top organisational leadership. In fact, history has proven that women leaders have exhibited abilities to lead, especially at the top levels. Himusic (2022) points out that amongst Asian countries, there is still a considerable number of successful female leaders who are widely admired for their exemplary leadership performance. According to Kulkarni and Mishra (2022), writing in the Indian context commented that for organisations to sustainably end gender disparity; they closely monitor the implementation of policies ecosystem in order to minimise the gender barriers experienced by the women leaders. The sentiments are similar to the conclusion made by Ribeiro (2019) in Latin America: there was no policy change to address gender disparity as a barrier blocking women leadership ascendance to the top organisation jobs.

Women Leaders' Perceptions of the Barriers to Accessing Top Leadership

During the pre-colonial period, women's leadership was determined by cultural factors, religious, economic, marital status, and the prevailing situation (Weir, 2006). The status of women's leadership in sub-Saharan Africa is not well. For example, women leaders' marginalisation is one of the topmost concerns in the continent; additionally, the leaders have remained invisible and not considered in policy-making processes due to discriminatory practices. In essence, stakeholders in sub-Saharan Africa should focus more on the role of women leaders, in particular, addressing the cultural issues that drive gender stereotypes. Moreover, the phenomenon of women's leadership, especially in the sub-Saharan Africa context, has gained more attention and is now one of the top agendas among the academia, researchers, policymakers and developers (Issa et al., 2021).

Moreover, international bodies like the United Nations (UN) have pronounced their commitment to promoting more support and equitable development of African Women Leaders; for example, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 was developed as a framework that seeks to attain gender equality as the basis for realising sustainable development through equitable inclusion of women especially in decision making, governance and engagement in leadership positions. The elements of women's leadership are more unique. For example, they are more communal, relational, collaborative, and inclusive; such elements are critical in the sub-Saharan African context due to the social segmentation of the continent. For example, negative ethnicity and tribalism, clans, regionalism, gender, religion and denominationalism. Indeed, the value of women's leadership in building holistic and sustainable organisations and liveable societies where there are no gender stereotypes and prejudices cannot be overemphasised.

Developing wholesome women's leadership is foundational to sustainable development.

Nevertheless, due to challenges faced by women leaders, it has not been easy for them to secure top organisational leadership positions. For instance, upcoming and continuing women leadership face biases and stereotyping, inadequate representation, scarce advancement opportunities and career pathways, lack of mentorship due to low numbers of women executives, lack of family support, rigid and contradictory cultures of masculinity and femininity, lack of access and control over resources (Acevedo-Duque et al., 2021).

According to Cicchiello et al. (2021), whereas women's advancement and access to positions of leadership have improved significantly over the years, men have nevertheless continued to occupy most mid-management positions. In that regard, maximum executive positions remain male-dominated at all global levels because of the uneven 'playground' and restricted women participation due to socio-cultural factors and runaway masculinity. Indeed, despite the women possessing leadership abilities, interests, and availability, they have remained underrepresented (Bulmer et al., 2021). However, due to the rigid cultural framework, potential female leaders, especially in rural sub-Saharan African countries, go unrecognised largely because of the cultural and social environment that constrains the full development of female leaders. Notwithstanding the fact that gender inequity in leadership is endemic, international bodies like the African Union (through its strategic framework for sustainable development) have consistently demonstrated an unwavering commitment towards the realisation of gender equity in accessing leadership at all levels (Oyebanji and Oreke, 2023).

Additionally, another similar study was done in Botswana; Pheko (2014) carried out an empirical study and investigated the Botswana female managers' strategies for entering and succeeding in managerial positions, the challenges they face and the consequences of success. The study concluded that following the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, the Government made substantial policy adjustments with a view to

promoting gender equality. Even though Botswana made significant headway by increasing the number of women appointed to decision-making positions, still the changes do not present any significant statistical significance yet (Bulmer et al., 2021). For that matter, like any other country in the world, Botswana is nowhere near achieving 50% gender parity in accessing leadership positions. Besides, other related studies have pointed out that over time, the number of women leaders in senior management in Botswana has been going down. Therefore, the social environment where the women leaders in top positions in Botswana still remains unsustainable, weak, and unfriendly for female leaders and managers (Poltera, 2019). All the same, there is still hope for continual improvement in achieving higher representation of women in top positions of leadership. In that regard, Dzimiri and Loyiso (2022, p. 11) state,

“The achievement of gender equality also requires the elimination of harmful practices against women and girls, such as discrimination, stereotyping, and other cultural beliefs and practices that are oppressive to women. Female school heads need the respect they deserve as leaders from both the organisation and the community. The data from the participants revealed that some female school leaders are not welcome in the communities where they are posted. It seems the challenges that the participants faced were based on school location, marital status, gender, religious affiliation, lack of training in leadership, and lack of community support. Female school heads' careers could change and become more enjoyable if these issues are addressed” (Dzimiri and Loyiso, 2022, p. 11).

Nevertheless, what stakeholders should do in order to achieve gender parity across the board is to become more intentional and very particular in eliminating the harmful practices against women and girls, such as stereotyping, discrimination, and oppression (Donmez and Celikel, 2023). Moreover, women's leadership should be encouraged and supported in all social institutions like schools, religious institutions, and in the community too. According to Poltera (2019), in

principle, women leaders are firstly accredited for resonance-building leadership styles. Secondly, they are praised for being strong in adaptive communication skills and thirdly, for applying in their leadership excellent elements of leadership such as qualities of cooperation, mentoring and collaboration. Such elements of leadership are critical for stable and sustainable organisations in the sub-Saharan African region of the world, where fewer organisations rarely attain 60 years of operation (Khushk et al., 2022).

There is sufficient evidence that very few empirical studies analyse the context of African women's leadership (Titi and Haque, 2017). Therefore, so little is written on the challenges, experiences, modalities, and factors influencing access and experiences of the African women leaders and top organisation positions. However, from a general perspective, some of the challenges troubling women leaders in the sub-Saharan African region include retrogressive cultural beliefs and practices that tend to discriminate against women, sex stereotypes, lack of access to basic education, inadequate access to credit facilities, lack of involvement and engagement of women leaders in decision making.

According to Dzimiri and Loyiso (2022), in their empirical study in South Africa, they found that the problem with women leaders was not competency; however, the women leaders in organisations faced challenges like 1) family responsibilities. Thus, working mothers were weighed down by time-consuming and demanding domestic responsibilities; undeniably, the family or domestic responsibilities influenced their careers negatively. 2) Women leaders are also faced with gender-based stereotypes that emanate from the retrogressive cultural practices and value dimensions of society, which are seen as the major barriers to women's advancement. Consequently, even though attempts have been made to improve things through effective legislation, most nations have still recorded dwindling opportunities for women to access top organisational positions (Galletta et al., 2022) with reference to the social environment where women leaders work, it has remained highly toxic

for the women leaders. For example, generally, there is a lack of strong values and ethics among the leaders; without values and ethics, leadership remains unregulated and open to all manner of abuse (Francis et al., 2021).

The Experience of Female Leaders In Kenya

In Kenya, the Government's commitment to support the progressive advancement of women's leadership and development, recognition of women's rights and gender equality are all enshrined in the promulgated Constitution of 2010 (World Bank, 2020; Kipkosgei, 2023). However, the implementation of the Constitutional claims has not been easy; Kenya, like any other country in sub-Saharan Africa the society is highly patriarchal, a factor that highly limits women leaders' ascendancy to higher organisational positions (Ondicho, 2021). Therefore, even though the promulgated Constitution of 2010 constitution was meant to emancipate Kenyan marginalised communities and holistic social transformation, women remain significantly vulnerable and highly disadvantaged in accessing higher positions of power. As a way of boosting women's representation in leadership and decision-making bodies, the 2010 Constitution also introduced a mandatory one-third gender quota; the fundamental principle behind the requirement of the one-third quota was to prevent any single gender from holding more than two-thirds of elective and appointive positions in public organisations and bodies in the Republic of Kenya (Kenya Government, 2010). However, the implementation of the requirement has been tumultuous. Another challenge that has been facing women leaders, especially in the political sector, is the lack of access to financial resources. It is not cheap to run for any political office in the Kenyan context; to some extent, it is like political leadership is sold to those with money. A closer examination of the challenges facing women leaders in Kenya is not unique to those in the larger sub-Saharan African countries. For example, the gender roles stereotypes, inadequate access to quality education, and underrepresentation in policy-making bodies.

These are gaps this present study attempted to respond to (Rukumana, 2023).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As a matter of fact, it may not be easy for most of the traditional and dominant leadership theories. It may not comprehensively capture and fully explore the perceptions and experiences of the women leaders in their work. Therefore, this study arrived at the feminist theory to shed more light and illuminate key barriers to accessing top leadership positions and trends in women's leadership (Rukmana et al., 2023). The key element of feminist theory is the focus on the emancipation of women in general and a fundamental step in boosting women's leadership. The second theory is leadership theory. This theory emphasises more on the practice of leadership framework, leadership styles and the pathway towards access to the top organisational positions.

Feminist Theory

The Feminist theory is made up of three waves; the first wave was popular in the early 19th Century, while the second wave operated in the 1960s and 1970s; finally, the third wave was in operation in the 1990s (Chamberlain, 2017). From a general point of view, feminist theory or simply feminism assumes that there should be social equality among all the sexes in all areas of life, for example, socioeconomic and socio-political. In its application to leadership, the theory roots for equality for women leaders and male leaders. While the theory describes the need for equality between men and women, hitherto, it does not provide a positive pathway for the desired change. Therefore, it leaves a lot to desire; for example, it blames everything on patriarchy, accuses men of greed, and accuses men of perpetrating violence against women (Lay and Daley, 2007; Mohajan and Mohajan, 2022). In doing so, the theory falls short of demonstrating how both leadership (male and female) can be harmonised, complemented, and integrated for a more holistic and sustainable organisation (Day and Wray, 2018). Dethroning male leadership and replacing it with female leadership takes us back to the same problem we

are trying to solve discrimination and exclusion of women leaders from all decision and policy making, and consequently form the processes of development and social change. It was, therefore, necessary for a second theory (Jain, 2020).

Leadership Theory

Leadership theory attempts to offer the explanations of ascendancy to positions of leadership (Almeshref and Khwanda, 2022); in fact, most particularly, the theory describes how and why it is possible for some to access leadership. For example, some of the leadership theories focus on traits and behaviours that favour some individuals in their access to leadership positions (Berg et al., 2017). Moreover, some people possess very strong ethical standards and sensibilities in their lives, others possess interpersonal skills, while others may be highly skilled in communication (Drzewiecka and Roczniowska, 2018). According to Gameda and Lee, (2020), one of the elements causing disagreement among students of leadership is the debate about whether leaders are born or made. However, that aside, the theory of leadership gives room for more innovation in applying the theory in modern times. In that regard, as Yahaya and Ebrahim, (2016) opine, rather than focusing on the individual leaders, practitioners consider environmental factors to give room for contingency and situational theory. For that matter, the leader emerges from the interactions through a mix of things: through interrelationships with other people, the situation itself, and by collaboration and involvement of others to arrive at a better solution (Yaseen, Al-Janaydab, Alc, 2018). Therefore, the leader emerges as a result of the complex situation and not by consideration of the person's attributes and strengths.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

For the design of this study, the researcher preferred a descriptive study because the design allows data collection that can yield statistical outcomes (Younas, 2019). Moreover, the design was also considered because the data can be

utilised in a secondary study (Bressan et al., 2021). Finally, the data collected from descriptive research can be applied to diverse data analysis techniques (Benmira and Agboola, 2021).

Research Method

The researcher employed mixed methods for this study; the researcher preferred the method because it is highly useful when attempting to understand a contemporary phenomenon that is still obscure (Bressan et al., 2021). Therefore, to answer the research questions, both qualitative and quantitative data were used (Younas, 2019; Agarwal et al., 2020). The researcher employed a questionnaire comprised of open-ended questions and some multiple-choice questions. Moreover, the utilisation of diverse data collection techniques was found to be a good basis for the reliability of the information and furthermore useful in limiting any form of distortions and guaranteeing a better study quality in the end (Bressan et al., 2021; Creswell 2014).

The target population were the Deputy Principals in primary schools who had served within a period of 5-10 years in the same grade for the said period of time. 18 female Deputy Heads were purposefully selected from four sub-counties in the County based on the predetermined criteria. The entire population was studied because the number was small. The study was conducted in four different sub-counties selected randomly and drawn from Machakos County. A pilot study was done in Machakos Town sub-county. The researcher considered the pilot study as fundamental because it increased the likelihood of success and provided valuable insights about the research tools and the validity of the data collected. Analysing quantitative data entailed turning the raw numbers into meaningful data, and then the researcher calculated the frequencies of variables. To get a better picture, percentages were used as a way of indicating the differences between variables. The qualitative data was analysed using the emerging themes, patterns, and relationships; based on that, and then the researcher interpreted the emerging meaning. The researcher had ethical considerations: the

participants were at liberty to participate in the study or not; and finally, they were helped to give an informed consent (Creswell, 2014).

FINDINGS

The study established that 55% of the deputies had overstayed in the same position and served for

over 10 years. As it was captured during the Focus Group Discussions, their male counterparts had progressed to become Principals or other high-ranking positions in the Ministry of Education. Therefore, even though women wanted to ascend on the promotion ladder, their ascendance to top positions was not easy.

Table 1: Deputy Principals and the years they served in the same position.

Item	F	%
Deputy Principals for 10 years and above	10	55.6
Deputy Principals for 5 years	5	27.8
Deputy Principals for 1 to 4 years	3	16.7
Total	18	100.0

Source: Field data

The perceptions of teachers who had overstayed in the same position for 10 years and over were that the stagnation was not because of competency or skills; rather, it was due to gender issues because their male counterparts who served for fewer years or fewer had progressed to higher positions. This was expressed better by one of the respondents, KY 01.

We have stagnated in the same position for a long time; some of our male counterparts have either progressed to become full

Principals or have been promoted to other senior positions within the Ministry of Education. We have no other way to interpret our delay and stagnation; we perceive it to be an issue of gender disparity (KY 01).

The Barriers to Accessing Top Organisational Positions

The respondents were asked, "What are your perceptions on the cause of the delayed promotions to higher offices?"

Table 2: Female Deputy Principals' perceptions of causes of delayed promotions

Item	f	%
Non-performance	0	0.0
Lack of qualifications	0	0.0
Male teachers are more likely to be promoted	7	38.9
Promotion Boards are not friendly	3	16.7
I fear delocalisation; I may be sent far from my family	8	44.4
Total	18	100.0

Source: Primary data

According to the study, 39% of the female teachers felt that their male counterparts were more likely to be promoted. That means their motivation to apply for promotion was low; therefore, lack of motivation was a factor since they perceived their male colleagues stood more chance. Gender disparity stood very high. However, the family factor also featured high. The fear of being delocalised, which meant being sent to a different home County; 44% were afraid of being promoted and then delocalised to far places. Women's consideration of their families is

a factor to reckon with. Thus families come first to most working women. One of the respondents expressed the two factors very well during the FDG discussions (M2),

"Our likelihood of being promoted to the next level is not very high; firstly our male colleagues stand a better chance than us; that is a fact because always when we go for interviews, even if we are the majority, more male colleagues are considered compared to us. Secondly, the promotion Boards also are not very friendly because they are composed

of more men, and men do not understand women's concerns when it comes to work-related issues. Thirdly, our families may suffer after someone is promoted and then sent to some distant country. That does not motivate most of us to apply; the delocalisation comes with a lot of disruption, and it is better to remain together with your family than be promoted and separated indefinitely from the family.” (M2)

Key issues that seemingly dissuaded female teachers from seeking higher leadership positions were family and gender-related complexities like being underrepresented in the interview boards and past instances where more male colleagues were considered for promotions.

Objective 2: Support Offered in attempt to Access Top Position

The study established that the female teachers lacked support from the family 69%; the promotion was feared to come with a lot of disruptions to the family because whether employed or not employed, family matters are a priority to the women. Then, 31% lacked support from the workplace, especially their fellow female colleagues who had worked in the same position for a long and could not be considered for promotions even though they always attended the interviews. This issue was elaborated more during the FDGs; one of the respondents had this to say (K04),

“As a female worker, much of what happens to you has to be sanctioned by the larger family. So, at times, you may want to go for promotional interviews, but the rest of the family members may not support the idea; they may raise issues about the farms,

domestic animals, the children, their education, and finally, your personal security in case the promotion comes with delocalisation. Also, our fellow colleagues have very discouraging reports about the interview Boards; they are never friendly to female employees and their dynamics. For example, they may keep on repeating the question, “Are you ready to be delocalised?” They know what a family means to a woman; such questions are a threat to us as women because abandoning one's family for whatever reason is next to impossibility.” (K04).

Experience, qualifications, and performance can be checked across the board during interviews for promotions, whether for female or male teachers. However, there are some dynamics that need special consideration when dealing with female teachers seeking for consideration to higher positions in the service.

Barriers to Access to Higher Offices

Based on the study findings, fear of possible disintegration of their families was one of the topmost barriers for female Deputy Principals. Therefore, without much consideration for the wellness of their families then they are likely to miss out on promotions. Another barrier was the perceived patriarchal culture; as mentioned in objective 02, the interview Boards were mostly populated by men who seemingly had little understanding of women's dynamics. Secondly, more men were considered for promotions compared to women. So, the two (family roles and patriarchal culture) were seen as the major barriers for the Deputy Principals seeking promotions to higher offices.

Table 3: Barriers faced by Female Deputy Principals in accessing higher officers.

Barriers	f	%
Patriarchal culture	6	33.3
Gender stereotype	4	22.2
Family roles	7	38.9
Inadequate Positions	0	0.0
Not willing to apply	0	0.0
Fear of administrative roles	1	5.6
Total	18	100.0

Source: Primary data

During the FDGs, one of the respondents commented this, K12.

“Family comes first in our hearts and lives. Therefore, the fear of family disintegration is a big barrier. For example, my neighbour has two sets of twins who have only been separated by a year. If she were to be promoted and delocalised, that family would really suffer. Secondly, the play field is not level; we see a lot of patriarchy where men are the dominant gender during the interviews. To us, that is a barrier because the men do not fully understand our dynamics as women; perhaps if there were more women, they could understand our concerns, like being posted nearer to our families” (K12).

Apart from the traditional and professional barriers, family and patriarchal factors should be considered when considering female teachers' promotions.

DISCUSSION

The study found that 50% of the female Deputy Principals had stagnated in that position for 10 years and beyond that period even though they had good qualifications, high performance, and experience. According to (Khushk et al. 2022) women leaders need support, professional development, empowerment, and the acquisition of new skills in order to move on. Unless they are supported, they may end up wallowing in negativity, lack of self-efficacy and low performance. The few women leaders who have made it were acting as individuals but not as a result of networking; women leaders need more collaboration in order to benefit from peer support, mentorship, and modelling (Machokoto et al., 2023).

Most of the barriers, according to the study findings, can be solved if the Government and other actors have the political will and are willing to put in place strong policies. For example, according to Pierli et al. (2022), given the contribution of women leaders to organisational stability and economic sustainability, strong and relevant policies need to be put into place in order

to tap their full potentialities, Poltera (2019) of the same opinion. The cited barriers that trouble women leaders in their pathway to higher offices are known; they are not new: patriarchal culture, gender stereotypes, family roles, and fears for administrative roles (Kipkosegei, 2023; Ribeiro, 2019; Rukmana et al., 2023 and Ondicho, 2021). What is needed most to solve them once and for all is a political will to develop the relevant legal framework and relevant policies to make the playground more even for both males and females for better performance and future expectations for all employees. Finally, Benmira and Agboola (2021) point out that to usurp high leadership positions is not by birth or gender but through evolution; that means through different situations, a leader evolves: it may be a woman or a man. That shows why career stagnation is dangerous because a leader stops being creative and innovative, which leads to limited growth and also undermines one's performance and job satisfaction (Rumana et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

The presence of women in higher organizational officers is greatly limited. Even though they demonstrated their desire for progression to higher positions by applying for the higher positions; they were mostly promoted to the positions of deputy principals. However, their progression to full principals or other higher positions has not been easy. For example over 55% of the women had overstayed in the same position for over 10 years. Then according to the study, 22% did not progress to higher due to gender stereotypes, however, their male counterparts were considered for higher positions easily. Finally, the study also found that among the women, family played a critical role. For instance, 44% of the respondents feared that after being promoted, they might be sent far from home, thus being able to play their family obligations. Furthermore, the study found that 39% of the respondents said that they were held from applying for promotions because of family roles.

Recommendations

When new positions open up, the policymakers should aim at those who have stagnated for some time. Women staff need to be deployed in areas where their families will not be negatively affected. The common barriers affecting female officers' progression and career development need to be solved by putting the relevant policies in place.

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