Breaking the Glass Ceiling In Kenya: Defining Attributes Of Trailblazing Women in Higher Education Leadership Positions

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Abstract

Patriarchal issues, in which the women's role was to always take care of the family and pursue motherly duties have hampered women's quest for ascendency to leadership positions, and more so in Africa. Yet, as the years and generations pass, women are just as capable to be a leader in big companies, yet due to past traditions they are still viewed as the caretaker of the family. The objective of the study was to presents in detail the attributes of the women trailblazers in higher education leadership in Kenya. A feminist approach problematizes the gendered relations in universities which research has pointed to inequalities in the distribution of resources and opportunities.This study is situated within the African Feminist theoretical framework because it is central to the fight against oppression of women in Africa and has granted women a platform to voice their concerns. The plank of African feminism postulates that, in many parts of Africa, women strive to bear and rear children in addition to having economic and political roles. This theory underpinned this study because African feminist perspective problematizes the blatant discrimination against women in all cadres, particularly in leadership levels across institutions. The study was qualitative in nature and was based on a census survey design. The research targeted 107 women in leadership ranks of principals, research centers' directors, deans, and heads of departments, as well as deputy vice-chancellors and vice-chancellors across the 32 public universities.The results from the study are mainly based on a verbatim narrative of 18 women leaders in response to the research questions. Some of the 18 participants currently occupy senior leadership positions and small number of former leaders that have since completed their terms, retired or moved on to leadership positions outside the university. Overall the respondents are associated with 12 of the 32 public universities in Kenya. The study answered the research question: What is the defining attributes of the women in higher education leadership in Kenya? The study found that the attributes can be broadly categorized as leadership style and quest for identity, the right skillset, education, and training, activism and collaboration, reliance on role models and mentors, demonstration of ambition and standing out, and being an embodiment of spiritual values. The study concluded that it's through the exposition of this attributes that the women in higher education leadership have been able to break the glass ceiling.

KeyWords: *Leadership, Skillset, Education, Training, Activism, Collaboration, Role Models,Mentors, Spiritual Values.*

1. Leadershipand Burning Quest for Identity

One participant had a great story on her journey that started as a diploma student in the same institution she is now heading. She is a proud feminist who advocates for equality and respect for girls and women. Based on thematic analysis, the respondent shared her wealth of experience that this paper captured under the thematic spirit of mark of leadership and identity as follows:

- Anna provides a list of success factors including leadership style, personal initiatives, keen interest in volunteerism, energy, self-drive, long work hours, participate in multiple committees, write proposals for community projects. Sit in advisory committees.

Transparent leadership, firm control work with people who work, empower and discipline in equal measure, results driven.

From her experience, the respondent avers to the fact that women academicians have to fight from within their institutions for space, promotion, and recognition despite being more assiduous and productive than male colleagues. Their incremental success in the fight for leadership within their ranks has worked to disrupt the trend of hiring externally while overlooking homegrown talent. It is no longer appropriate to appoint women as compromise candidates to ameliorate powerful male candidates as revealed by Onsongo (2004). Self-Mastery and leadership identity received 89% approval by the respondents.

On the way to self-mastery, women have to work on their soft skills some of which are outlined above. Leadership style is very

important to either encourage team support or not. Other factors like energy, self-drive, and participating in corporate social responsibilities help to inculcate support from community at large. Transparency and accountability are just two main values that are integral to exceptional leadership. A leader of integrity is respected and supported as they empower, reward, and discipline.

Some of the responses confirm previous findings and recommendations by scholars like Sifuna (2006) and Odhiambo (2014) that "visionary and creative leadership will be achieved through restructuring of leadership, governance and management systems to offer higher education institutions the autonomy and academic freedom it so desperately needs and deserves."

The following two narratives from the top leaders at two universities bolster the earlier findings and attest to need for a paradigm shift if women are to take charge in institutions. However, change comes even faster when women prepare for bold transformational milestones because the higher the stakes the greater the challenge. It is time feminists took off their gloves as respondent Victoria shares:

- Go for the jugular. Fight to your last bit. Hit hard against any form of discrimination. Have the mental stamina to say no to anybody placing barriers to your collective aspirations as women.

She challenges women to step out of self-defined limits to venture beyond their fears and implement massive projects as long as they stay focused on goals. Vitoria talked of her own experience as she ventured into income generating projects to finance the expansion of her university to one of the largest public institutions in Kenya within a short stint.

Charity, citing her personal experience, finds no fear in pushing through an agenda that is well thought out and challenges women to believe in what they do. She urges ambitious women to be fearless, to ignore negative voices, and to propel their agenda.

On good governance and feminist goals, one-woman academician, Molly, appeals for team building and synergy to get ahead:

- People come with diverse skill sets and as a leader my role is to recognize and support them to bring out the best in them, the untapped potential. A collaborative feminist leadership expectation helps transformative. Feminism is collective. You want to bring along fellow women as you rise to leadership. This way you have the critical mass to make gender friendly policies. You do not want to standout as the only most successful vision woman in a setting. It is folly.

This can be explained through the expression that "it is in giving that we receive" (Holy Bible). Women should use their positions at the top to create more space for women, engage from within, and champion their interests by lobbying men through African feminism and seeking equal opportunity rights. Furthermore, once in, the chosen leadership style determines the success or failure of the woman leader, who is judged more harshly than her male predecessors and counterparts. Radical styles and a firm grip on the institutions could work towards success. Women leaders tend to be more transformational than transactional and their leadership traits are affective, nurturing, and sensitive. However, exhibiting traits that are usually associated with male leadership can be very effective because those who are led appear more comfortable with masculine leadership stereotypes (agentic and competent). This was exemplified by Faith (information sourced from desk research)

who went way past the glass ceiling to be a celebrated female leader known for her firm approach to issues.

Patriarchy fought back in describing Faith's cutting-edge management style as iron-fisted and vindictive for disciplining a male for poor performance. A male complained about Faith's high-handedness but the system relied on her no-nonsense attitude to achieve goals. She knew her role very well, and pushed Kenya's agenda in international circles. She was a highly-competent administrator associated with male leadership stereotypes although a true feminist who championed the accommodation and promotion of women in public service.

Men are associated with hostile administrative and management styles. When a woman is confident and firm and would neither entertain mediocrity nor male chauvinism, they are labelled masculine. She embodied both the softer and harder side of these personality traits. It worked, and she was the most powerful woman in Kenya during her tenure. She was able to appoint and promote women to high positions as well as defend them against the patriarchs she worked with. This kind of leadership approach is missing in institutions of higher learning. What matters most is ethical leadership while understanding the politics as well as using power mindfully. The findings confirm that leadership style matters and therefore one has to select the most appropriate style to succeed.

Studies have concluded that society has banished women to peripheral positions especially as an aftermath of colonialism. The colonial legacy of oppression and servitude, domestic and reproductive duties, and cultural interference insinuated and escalated biased gender role expectations (Mama 2006; Omwami, 2011).

Participant Molly advises aspiring women leaders to prepare for their own eventual absence through succession planning: "From where you are seated, envision the dusk days of your leadership. Prepare to pass the button. Groom others to take over from you when you retire. Mentor them to be at the helm."

The forgoing is suggestive of transformative leadership style that confers a female leadership advantage. The advice is smart and courageous; ensuring that there are competent people to take over eliminates tactics of curtailing women's promotions because of lack of personnel to carry on their old responsibilities and values.

Patricia adds that personal initiatives make the difference and grounded in spirituality as well as a spirit of excellence:

- Be real, no veils… Persistence, focus and sheer hard work. I have had to reach out to cross-cutting issues like gender to expand my sphere of influence and consultancies. Widen your sphere of influence and tell people in positions of leadership and decision making what you can offer to the institution. Study and read very widely so that you are always ahead of the pack so that your ideas are current and refreshing. No one is interested in the mundane and common knowledge from an African woman… Look for international networks to enable you 'think outside the box' and improve the science.

Patricia states further that widening one's sphere of influence is very crucial although she is quick to state that hard work, reading widely, persistence and international networking will enhance exposure. To counter their exclusion from critical networks, women are urged to volunteer in theme committees to gain insights

while smart contributions that would shape policy and get noticed. Additionally, in her words Patricia echoes Anna thus:

- Volunteer creative ideas at opportune times. Study and read very widely so that you are always ahead of the pack- so that your ideas are current and refreshing. No one is interested in the mundane and common knowledge from an African woman ….Be a team member and not a lone ranger …..Be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

In addition to articulating issues as volunteer, being knowledgeable of upcoming issues provides heads up for lobby networks especially as the men formulate unclear staff development policies loaded with loopholes for unfair implementation. Women serving close to the centers of power will sense imminent 'leadership imposition' and could use the information to forestall such acts.

Christina offer suggestions for navigating the labyrinth. Just as Mama (2006) calls upon high education institutions to produce gender competent graduates, Christina suggests an educational curriculum that includes instructions on valuable life skills for self-mastery at an early age to transform society. Women will not have to gaze at men to feel complete but will be proud of their difference, for they are who they are. Performing maleness would be uncalled for. Christina emphasizes:

- You don't have to speak or act like women to be accepted. Break away from stereotypes of the traditional, subtle, compassionate woman… embrace culture and understand its significance but know your rights and responsibilities Your self-confidence must come through; demonstrate your knowhow and self-mastery…. Develop leadership (self-mastery and leadership identity) at a personal level early enough…. People are not looking for a woman; they are looking for a leader so seek leadership without drawing unnecessary attention to your gender…Women have to project themselves as leaders first and then women comes naturally but as a secondary factor.

Women should use their positions at the top to create more space for women, engage from within, champion their interests by lobbying men through African feminisms- seeking equal opportunity rights for women. I argue that there should be no distinction between women in leadership and feminists in leadership. Women should be synonymous with feminists. Furthermore once in, the chosen leadership style determines the success or failure of the woman leader who is judged more harshly than their male predecessors and counterparts. Radical styles and a firm grip on the institutions could work towards success whether covertly or overtly combative style usually associated with men, the end justifies the means. One leader, now a university Chancellor was seen as ruthless in her approach to professionalism. I suggest that women leaders should adapt a style and demeanor that maximizes their stakes. To borrow from Jennifer Jones (2016) article "Talk like a Man," where she describes Hillary Clinton's personality metamorphosis over the years, aspiring women could illustrate a mastery of situational personality traits, even to kind of circus levels because routes for women to leadership are circuitous. Jones (2016) adds that expectations of leadership and institutional arrangements have implications for the type of individuals who run for public office as well as the self-presentational strategies that politically ambitions women use to advance through the labyrinth

of leadership. This argument goes for women in pursuit of leadership including in higher education, an environment in which qualification is not the sole criteria. Women are forced to remodel and create self- presentation strategies which may be against their individual beliefs and personal convictions nor the collective values of feminism. She observes that women go out of their way to cultivate appropriate and effective self-presentation packages, hybrid of femininity and masculinity. She takes note of a personality that reconciles symbolic attitudes towards gender with masculine prototypes of political leaders a watermelon scenario.

Although Jones (2016) poses a question with regard to women seeking political leadership, I echo her by asking a rephrased similar question with regards to women academicians seeking leadership in higher education institutions. How do female academicians self-present in order to access male dominated ranks within HE institutions? What strategies do they use to navigate through the academic political labyrinth? Must they act like men? Gaze towards maleness? Do they act in masculine ways and speak with a masculine tones just as Jones (2016) concludes that power speaks with a masculine voice. I argue that women are caught up in performativity act like men and try to self-present as beyond reproach and masculine to access male dominated professions. In the face of immense pressures and tensions women acquire self-presentation strategies that power them to leadership in patriarchal terrains. Just as in political and other leadership, women must learn how to assemble their arsenal to negotiate with the micro-politics of higher education and challenge power dynamics. What matters most is ethical leadership while understanding the politics as well as using power mindfully.

The earlier finding is confirmed by Patricia's emphasis on ethical leadership:"Ethical standards are key- Lead by example and work in the league of winners. Be emotionally sensitive in the workplace as IQ alone is not enough."

Studies have concluded that society has banished women to peripheral positions especially as aftermath of colonialism. The colonial legacy of oppression and servitude, domestic and reproductive duties and cultural interference insinuated and escalated biased gender role expectations (Mama 2006; Omwami, 2011). Participant Molly stated that anyone can achieve a work-family balance and be successful in both.

Women face obstacles and sabotage when they get into leadership by being starved of resources by the men that control key positions. Manipulate and blackmail using decision making power and authority to frustrate gender equity even, after policy and legal interventions (Kiamba, 2008) and bolsters what the previous articulation that women 'fail' because they are judged by systems setup by men reflecting male standard (Oakley, 2001). The rapid expansion of educational opportunity in Kenya in the face of budgetary deficits in the last decade has compounded the challenges facing top university administrators. For Sandra the solace is partly found in spirituality to weather frustrations:

- My university is newly stablished. The recent expansion of university education opportunity means that each institution had to devise income generating ventures to supplement budgets… it is not easy to content with acute shortage of resources to fund programs. I retreat to prayer, faith and hope in times of limitations, betrayals and all sorts humiliations. Resilience, determination and prayer are my default mode.

The strategy described by the above participant resonates with the finding by Ngunjiri (2010b) that in addition to hope, forbearance

and resilience, spiritual leadership for Kenyan women also necessitates a dose of courage to act in the face of challenges and opposition.

Contemporary African women see themselves as walking a political and gender tightrope and in most cases turn to spirituality for divine power to transform societal notions of gender and familial roles. There is need for abundant grace to be able to juggle professional responsibilities, political astuteness, and family expectations. Participant Alice describes her approach to leadership as:

- Listen to the followers. Instill in them a sense of belonging. Make them see your vision of where you would want the university to be in the future. Make them be proud to be associated with you and the university.

She tells us that feminism is about fiercely being bold, assertive and fearless in the quest to dismantle equality of rights and opportunity.

2. The Right Skillset, Education, and Training

Of all the respondents, 78% felt that educational, training and other qualifications make women to stand out from the crowd. Pandor (2005) urges women to learn how to navigate within the micro-politics of higher education to be able to challenge the power dynamics. Women in academia are urged to be creative as they build coalitions to mobilize stakeholder activism mainly borrowing from political activism because leadership is a cooperative and collaborative endeavor bringing together the energy and passions of a range of people (Saddler et al., 2005).

Patricia advises us to understand male stream worldview and work to disrupt by obtaining the right qualifications and competencies.

Women are advised to learn ways of recreating their personalities for acquisition of skills to be better equipped for leadership success once at the top as emphasized by Christina calling on to women to be well armed with competence and confidence: "Be at your very best. Execute duties with military precision. Be a paragon of excellence and take everything within your elegant stride. Have self believe and stand tall."

Similarly, Maria urges women to make lemonade out of lemons. She says that leaning and innovation and taking every assignment seriously for success:

- Use any position you find yourself in as a learning point… a stepping stone to new heights. We should all learn to appreciate the different positions we hold … you learn a lot and prepare yourself for new offices... Take any assignments you get seriously and strive to learn as much as possible because you will need it later.

Molly advises women to step outside their comfort zone and to step into untested waters and unpopular careers fields usually labeled masculine. Meanwhile, the possession of academic credentials and skill sets has been covered deeply in existing body of knowledge although I still go back to participant Faith's advice to women: "Have the correct academic papers. Burn the midnight oil to climb the academic ladder. Be self-made by enriching your curriculum vitae with relevant academic, and research credentials. Be ambitious and always improve your CV."

Women ought to navigate within the micro-politics of higher education to be able to challenge the power dynamics (Pandor, 2006). Women in academia are urged to be creative as they build coalitions to mobilize stakeholder activism mainly borrowing from political activism because leadership is a cooperative and collaborative endeavor bringing together the energy and passions of a range of people (Saddler et al., 2005). Participant Anna puts it quite clearly:

- Strengthen your professional networks; widen your horizon by working with influencers in areas that support your goals. Let people know you exist and what you can bring into leadership and decision making within institution. Share your skills and knowhow. Demonstrate your capability in projects of interest in or outside the institution. Be a mentor to others to enhance their self-esteem and self-confidence.

Elimination of discriminative criteria that classifies women based on ethnicity and origins of birth will ensure maximum placement of any qualified women in leadership positions in higher education. Women are disadvantage when regional balance is considered, the questions of origin by birth, origin by marriage, and origin by education/upbringing become problematic. Women cannot claim fully that they belong to their regions of marriage as they are regarded as outsiders, whereas regions of birth regard them as emigrants that no longer belong.

This double jeopardy should have no place in a modern nation and violates the equality principle of the 2010 Constitution of Kenya. Participant Emmy pleads for removal of obstacles that serve to benefit men who never shy from presenting themselves for positions they may not fully qualify (Coleman, 1997). Emmy calls for the elimination of dream killers; women's dream killing systemic and political structures:

- A good system nurtures talents of its entire population. There should be justice for every aspiring woman by granting equal access to opportunity. The playing field must be leveled and candidates judged according to their knowledge, skills, and competencies as the parameters for upward mobility. I wish it was practical to leave politics out of the academia.

She argues for the elimination of all forms of discrimination whether overt or covert which could create additional hiccups between and among women. No woman should be left out of a competition for a position to which they qualify because overall, there are fewer women than men to fill available positions. It is also a fact that different cultures shape women differently so that even if the field is levelled, the motivations may not be similar. In many instances women easily give up when the game goes dirty or is infiltrated by negativity. Opening up gender space to full competition may breed in fights informed by ethnic socialization and patriarchy but women are urged to see themselves collectively with a singular agenda of increasing their visibility in positions of leadership in academia. Sisterhood and womanism must be guarded and instead negotiate for a higher ratio to achieve 50% not the current fixation on 30%.

Participant Christina calls on women to be well armed in readiness for emerging positions and challenges: "be armed with most current and most need credentials and self-position for upward growth. Be ready when a slot avails itself that builds your block to leadership in the university. Be passive aggressive."

The more effective ways were not disclosed. I observed that successful individuals exercise caution and discretion on the information to share. Cards are kept close to their chests and an investigator will have the discretion of making inferences.

Women should make the best of token positions to demonstrate their competencies. The two thirds gender rule was an attempt in principle to increase women representation by not permitting either gender to occupy more than two thirds of any open positions. The rule would ensure women were guaranteed to take up at least one third of opportunities but to date it has not been effected due to male stream resistance resulting in token positions. I argue that token positions, after-thought positions, or even sympathy positions are better than the status quo and should be embraced as stepping stones for better visibility and more challenging roles ahead. In political leadership women are allocated token positions to appease voters and women have gone ahead to excel and earn positions through competitive politics. In most sectors, including in education when people get into positions as compromise candidates, they could be the start to a great career if harnessed well. Women ought to accept token positions and be strategic going forward. I agree with participants who advised women to use every opportunity as a learning moment.

Molly calls for diversification and venturing into disciplines that are traditional imagined as men's forte. There are more chances of success:

- Have a diversified academic portfolio. Double majors, combination of sciences and business management; project management and any rare fields like science that is traditionally masculine. Work hard to realize seemingly impossible goals… move to newly established smaller colleges outside the big cities.

Researchers have emphasized that not only the increased participation of women scientists promote diversity and enhance innovative power, but it also impacts the education and career development of future generations (Nelson and Rogers 2005; NRC 1991; Pell 1996; Sonnert and Holton 1996).

3. Activism and Collaboration

Nzomo (1993, 1995, and 2003) emphasizes the power of collective approaches. She tells us to seek allies supportive of affirmative action and feminist interests. Women across institutions are further reminded to self-organize to make use fellow women and like-minded male allies in positions of leadership to get what society has denied them for centuries, a place to sit at the negotiating table and determine their own destiny (Nzomo, 1997; Kabira and Kimani, 2012).

The timeless and invaluable advice has been applied by the successful women interviewed with Patricia sharing her own experience on how she sought allies both in Kenya and internationally:

- Attend and engage at international conferences to expand your networks. Share your knowledge and shine at the right forums and you will be sought after at home and abroad. Volunteer solutions in teams and think broadly. Make your mark. You will be noticed

Growe& Montgomery (2000) emphasized the value of networking, as well as strategic and collective bargaining, to which Patricia related:

- Networking and volunteering works for me. I took my creativity neighborhoods in the countryside where people practice subsistence farming. My campaign for a nutritious kitchen garden of traditional vegetables and support of girl child education became popular mentorship opportunities. Girls and women improved their wellbeing and had their self-esteem and self-confidence enhanced.

Collaboration brings in the critical mass to require to effect change of attitude by the dominant. Women ought to avoid getting entrapped in internal strife and competition amongst themselves brought about by tribalism, regionalism and political party politics. Emmy argues:

- Fight for level playing field even among women competitors and between men and women... it is ridiculous to relegate women intellectuals to flower girls roles of escorting men to interviews. In many instances decisions are already made on whom to appoint… there is no need to waste resources if that is the case. The ground should be leveled for fair competition because discrimination portrays mediocrity. We strive to voice our concerns against retrogressive behavior. You can do that as feminist or just as women.

Women should be accorded head start over men so as not to compete on equal footing, as exemplified by the additional women seats in the Kenya national assembly. The allocation of 47 women only parliamentary seats was aimed at slightly reducing the gender gap in the legislature albeit for only two parliamentary seasons i.e. the 11th in 2013 and 12th in 2017. Women should be able to draft, debate and pass gender friendly bills that form the bedrock of feminist ideals. Meanwhile out of the participants in this study only one identified with feminism. The scarcity of feminist champions in the academia in Kenya is worrying hence the question, are intellectuals reluctant to wade into murky activism or is it possible that they politic differently?

4. Reliance on Role Models and Mentors

The capacity of successful trailblazers to shape careers of those who look up to and come after them cannot be overstated. From the narrative taken verbatim from top women leaders in academia and some now in active politics, 78% held role models in high regard. This is echoed by participant Christina who shares that she identifies and takes advantage of the mentors that are around her whether male or female.

Hearing the experiences of women who have navigated their way to top echelons in higher education helps others understand the magnitude of potential challenges that lace the path towards career success and confirms previous findings that the higher the level of

education, the wider the gender gap in favor of the males (Otieno, 2001; Ngombe, 2003 &Bunyi, 2004). Their successes are attributed to hard work, drive and unrelenting spirit to realize career aspirations. These women are few and exceptional in approach, demeanor and foresight to withstand patriarchy that fights back continuously and viciously. It is true that women in management carefully assess career decisions in the light of their own values and belief systems, not a lack of confidence but the authenticity of their own feelings. I can conclude that women listen to their hearts more than their heads.

Feminist research advances several reasons why women do not support each other in organizations. One explanation is the token status advanced by Luke (2001) arguing that, the few women who achieve high positions tend to feel threatened by the growth of young women in similar careers. These women are strongly individualistic, tend to deny the existence of discrimination against women and do not want to be suspected of an exaggerated identification with women. They are in addition determined to succeed based on their own merit and expect the same of other women. Thus, they fail to support other women to achieve career success.

The respondents believed that mentorship plays a key role in giving women a head start in their career progression. At 56%, respondents acknowledge that both male and women role models are very important in their progression. Mentors also serve as role models, because women who enter the academic and educational professions need support from other people to adjust to their profession and to understand the culture of the institutions (Beck, 2008).

On mentorship Molly was categorical that "a strong mentorship program, layered programs for multiple levels. Readiness, training and mentorship combined with affirmative action and deliberate efforts for inclusion will certainly yield desired results."

The unanimity regarding the vitality of mentorship in leadership success by the foregoing negates earlier positions that were faulted for exhibiting less assertiveness, poor networking, and lack of support for other women, lack of personal conviction, lack of adequate knowledge and skills(Singh, 2000). It appears that even the women who do not consider themselves feminists in academia employ a combination of gender activism and some gaze towards the male as they lobby and network all sides.

It emerged from the field that participants identified with and benefitted from mentors and role models through both formal and informal relationships that molded their aspirations throughout their career journeys. Although women trailblazers were not too many most participants described how they shaped their successful persistence and resistance to survive in the academy. It is therefore true that mentorship in any form inducts mentees on the ethos of life and is an effective way to bequeath networks as a generational transfer of skills and to redistribute feminist knowledge. Although there are mixed views on the effectiveness of mentorship alone without sponsorship in translating into women's promotion (Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010), the participants in this study attribute their success to the presence of mentors, mentorship programs and role models that inspired them.

Sarah shared her views on strengthening competitiveness stating:

- Develop and implement targeted leadership programs geared towards opportunities. Foreign donor and non-governmental organizations provide free training for aspiring women leaders in politics. Local institutions should finance and run such

programs for academics and other professionals. The outcome of such training, mentorship and career guidance would be to increase women's self-efficacy and competitiveness

Self-efficacy is about personality. People are created different and can improve their self-efficacy as individual and collectively through training, borrowing from the wisdom of Alice who advises: "find and utilize platforms for mentorship…publish, attract funding, be different, teach, research & publish, supervise post graduates, attend conferences and collaborate with colleagues internationally."

Role models are defined as persons who distinguish themselves in such a way that others admire and want to emulate them (Dictionary.com). Many role models are unaware they are being looked up to even if they know that their successes and trajectories are enviable. People choose role models and work hard to be like them as the easier and cheapest way to self-improvement. It is therefore incumbent upon more successful women leaders to project traits which younger women are eager to replicate.

The unanimity regarding the vital role of mentorship in leadership success confirmed by the foregoing shows a paradigm shift although not totally negating earlier positions that faulted women for exhibiting less assertiveness, poor networking, and lack of support for other women, lack of personal conviction, lack of adequate knowledge and skills(Singh, 2000). Women are now more assertive, lobby networks strongly and rally both men and women in the spirit of African feminism to pursue feminist ideals, and it is paying albeit slowly. It is noteworthy that even the women who do not consider themselves feminists in the academy employ a combination of gender activism and some gaze towards the male as they lobby and network all sides. The majority of upcoming feminists and aspiring leaders look up to their successful older sister as sources of hope.

From the findings, none of the women appear to be not running mentorship programs nor have made mention of having recruited pupil mentors. Granted, all of them are role models who can mentor formally or informally so it is expected that they get more explicit with the succession plans for the next generation of higher education feminist leaders. It is a fact that substantial emotional labour and affective workload comes with mentoring, fortunately most of the knowledge and skills are passed effortlessly and unconsciously. Researchers have continued to decry the absence of mentors for example, Gachukia (2002); Growe& Montgomery (1999) and Otieno (2001) who argued that women in education lacked mentors. Kiamba (2008) reiterates that mentors are crucial for the protection of women's interests the academy because it has far reaching consequences in terms of developing future female leaders. It is certainly important to acknowledge Cole's (2006) observation that "women professors in higher education do not just appear out of nowhere. They have to be nurtured and developed throughout society".

5. Demonstration ofAmbition and StandingOut

Too much ambition kills a woman and too little takes her nowhere, so the saying goes. However those in authority must be made aware of your interests by offering to lead, to share knowledge and to give back.

To get noticed women are advised to exude confidence and be fiercely different. The difference should cause ripples to the status quo and earn you a spot. Respondent Charity calls on women to step up:

- Ambition drives success. Do not relent in search of career growth. Be determined to succeed through hard work and fearlessness. Embrace a tenacious spirit. Nothing is too hard. Work smart without mixing the personal with the professional. Keep your family /personal issues out of limelight because it could be used against you.

Depending on the circumstances, women can be tough and ruthless in decision making without fear of disapproval. Whereas men can get away with combativeness women are to walk a personality tight rope. However this study uncovered a different aspect of the successful women who is strong and assertive and takes on those who cross the line, wading into what is socially constructed as implicated as male territory This study found that the modern woman leader demarcate their territorial boundaries with assertiveness and pays no attention to stereotype and are admirable.

Lisa is admired and adored for her leadership success despite legal obstacles placed in her way, as demonstrated from the field notes:

- Having successfully fought off two judicial review applications to annul her appointment for a second term as VC, she fiercely demonstrated that her antagonists are motivated by malice and personal differences… sterling performance indicated by phenomenal growth of the university…

Women purposely join the boys club without fear of backlash by character assassins or fellow women gossip peddlers out to check their colleagues' momentum. Women are called upon to stand by fellow women. Molly instructs women should respect and support fellow women and not connect their achievements to other things whereas Christina said that a woman should be greatest at what they do to be sought after.

Grace advocates for universal support and targeted lobbyist advance within family and friends. She advises women seeking leadership to:

- Let your family know your aspirations and reach out for their support. Show them how your success translates into their own. Familial support is a must for success and a family that appreciates equality of gender and feminist initiatives translates into faster visibility of women in be that which encourages gender support…. Educate those around you i.e. family and friends on feminism.

Gender equality and mainstreaming require fuel and expertise for salience in public discourse beyond the university. Women in academia and beyond cannot afford to remain humble or muted, they must be heard and be seen to facilitate their advancement as exemplified by Lisa whose successful tenure was part of the documents reviewed as secondary sources for this study. According to documents she stood out in fighting for her rights. Having successfully fought off two judicial review applications to annul her appointment for a second term as VC, she fiercely demonstrated that her antagonists, motivated by malice and

personal differences. Her sterling performance is attested to by the phenomenal growth of the university in student numbers, variety of disciplines and additional infrastructure. It is not a coincidence that every woman participant in the interview gave 'standing out' thumbs up giving it 100% approval.

Some of the narratives from participants go on to teach women to be visible and relevant, like Charity who challenges women to be courageous. She emphasized:

- Be widely published in a variety of areas …. I have maintained writing and publishing culture as well as writing winning proposals for funding…be a strategic ally for societal sustainability and harmonious living as well as raising strong families for the future.

The unanimous concept of striving to stand out shows that one had to be different and do their best to shine.

Study participants disagreed with the notion that women fail to show interest in positions of increased responsibility. They stated that they not only applied for positions as they opened up but tirelessly exhibited and demonstrated interest through networks and activism.

Rebecca states:

- Express desire and demonstrate ability to lead… fight for space... demand gender balance, voice your concern for inequality. Call discrimination by its name; it lowers women's dignity; sensitize men to respect women and to encourage women to apply for elective posts as they arise... Do not give up – fail interviews until you pass – the right and best one for you is coming... Fight for yourself and others. Be a feminist champion covertly and overtly. It is ok to be a women champion for gender equality. Do not be a victim of stereotypes.

Charity advises women to assert themselves saying that women in search of growth to leadership should ignore stereotypical expectations "and throw caution through the window and go for what they want.

The participants in this study agreed that it takes multiple approaches and countless applications to be eventually get shortlisted for interviews. Successful people show interest in growth prospects and women are not an exception. Offering their candidature to fill open was viewed as a first step that eventually yielded favorable outcomes for the patient and persistent.

6. Being an Embodiment of Spiritual Values

Women have had to endure many struggles and have learned to lean on forbearance, resilience and hope drawn from religious teachings. According to Ngunjiri (2010), the African worldview has been described as "notoriously religious", a worldview described by scholars as one that involves the relationships between the physical, material world and the spiritual, immaterial world (Kasambala, 2005; Mbiti, 1969; Paris, 1995). The spirit, the Christian spirit, emboldened the women to unleash their potential

and to courageously apply their leadership capabilities for the benefit of humanity.

It is my observation that in addition to a host of strategies that women craft, adopt and implement, they seek refuge in deity to order their steps and to open doors. The spiritual assurance is resorted to mainly by the discriminated in line with teachings of many religions for example Christian biblical teaching in Psalm 37:23, "The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD: and he delighted in his way". Spirituality as a default setting emerged in this study overtly and covertly. Out of the 18 women respondents, 8 (44%) believed that prayer/spirituality played a key role in their success at the helm. This study revealed an angle of heavy reliance on spirituality by women as they make career choices, as they venture into higher office and at any points when they are required to make choices. The eight (8) who declared their reliance on prayer openly testified of the solution in hard work and God's help.

One senior academic participant, Patricia, said:

- By the grace of God, I have maintained a spirit of excellence while facing my weaknesses without hiding behind a secret veil - The humanness has attracted many seeking solutions in both the academia and social spheres in Kenya and beyond.

Whereas Isabella described her meteoric rise in four words: "Hard work and God."

Spirituality as a pillar was alluded to by respondents across the demographics so therefore cannot be described as more prominent among the younger or older of the women in leadership.

One respondent cited the role of spirituality in anchoring all she does and as vital for her survival. African feminist theorizing embodies other standpoints like Ubuntu and African cosmological spirituality that bring out fundamental principles of African people such as resilience amidst many struggles. The beneficence in spiritual leadership enables women to root out unjust arrangements, to be fully human (Ubuntu), and be in solidarity with each other as a unit. As participant Lisa, says she depends on God.

Dependence on deity underlines the role of spirituality in sustaining injury, surviving domination, arrogance and sabotage. Women populate religious spaces to seek God's intervention in all areas of their lives. It is not preposterous to conclude that spirituality was a strategy. I aver that women are not disclosing all their strategies and approaches used to ascend. It is impossible to find a woman saying they paid for their way up in one way or another.

Religion and culture inculcate modest in the way people speak about their achievements or present their success stories. Conscious of the risk of appearing proud, arrogant or conceited, the participants in this study avoided taking all the credit for the breakthroughs in their careers but owed to deity, the ultimate provider of strength, wisdom, knowledge and opportunity who strategically orders the steps of its people.

A majority of the participants exhibited traits of spiritual leadership. Spiritual leadership is defined as an observable phenomenon occurring when a person in a leadership position embodies spiritual values such as integrity, honesty, humility, and is ethical, compassionate, and respectful in the treatment of others (Reave, 2005).

The reliance on spirituality for leadership success and its centrality to women's choices, personalities and speeches was a profound finding. Four participants were explicit and still many others alluded to their source help as in the spiritual realm.

Whereas Sandra shared the secrets of her success as funding, support, education and Christianity (spirituality), Isabella owes her success to hard work and God, Patricia pointed in her response:

- To God is the glory. I could not have done anything on my own. There is too much adversity around. My spirituality has grounded me to achieve inner peace without having to wear a secret veil. Looking at my successful girl-child scholarship program for needy children for over 12 years, I can only give back through volunteering in the church.

Religion permeates every dimension of African life as stated by Ngunjiri (2010b) and earlier by Mbiti (1975) when he discussed how African cultural believes richly influences how people live, behave and act and the centrality of African cosmology in the customs and institutions of the people, in their values and laws, and in their economic life.

Majority of participants claimed to owe it to God and hard work. This reliance on deity is not unexpected given that women are intrinsically religious and could also be more superstitious than men. In traditional African cultural setting women are cautious and modest and would not readily take credit for their accomplishments nor broadcast their super strengths. I must acknowledge that there is a degree of bias to the extent that participants shared information selectively and the researcher had to conjecture strategies and approaches used to attain success.

The findings of this study reveal that spirituality is bedrock of African feminism; women have nowhere else to turn to fuel their determination. This observation validates earlier conclusions that African feminism and womanism recognize the realities of the social, cultural, historical, economic and cultural context of African women (Kolawole, 1997; Mikel, 1997; Mohanty, 2003; Oyewumi, 2003).

I deduced from the findings of this study that where success factors cannot be disclosed, isolated or specified, it boils down to faith, blessings and spirituality.

The forgoing lends credence to conclusions by Parsitau (2012) that women-focused non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and women-led Pentecostal and charismatic churches play a major role in seeking gendered social transformation in Kenya. I suggest that these organizations help pursue a feminist agenda fashioned in African Feminist approach.

Spirituality is a vital force that connects African peoples to the rhythms of the universe and their community (Wane, 2006). I argue that women are caught up in performativity act like men and try to self-present as beyond reproach in an effort to access male dominated professions. Spirituality and other self-presentations like speaking with a masculine tone hoists women even if they disrupt the salience of their gender because it has been determined that Power speaks with a masculine voice (Jones, 2016).

The role of spirituality as a pathway in the experience of women educational leaders is well-documented (Siddle-Walker, 2005). Tisdell (2006) situates spirituality into the discourse of higher education leadership and questions its exclusion in the role of

leadership in higher education. Tisdell advocates for a culturally responsive approach that recognizes the roles of spirituality in leadership in higher education. Furthermore, she argues that teaching in higher education "needs to be based on a culturally responsive epistemology" (p. 24), and cites Dillard (2000) who suggests that culturally responsive epistemology is both an intellectual and spiritual pursuit.

Ignoring the integration of spirituality and persistence among women working in institutions of education, for women in particular, amounts to a colorblind approach that helps to fashion academic cultures and systems of support that honor and affirm the path they journey toward education, equity, and ethics.

Systemic changes (i.e., policies, structures, and practices) in institutions of higher education need to take into account the challenges that women continue to endure in the academy, act against their dehumanization, and celebrate their contributions. Their courageous voices, new scholarship, and critical spiritual pedagogy are beneficial contributions to academic cultures.

As an identified source of strength, spirituality among those women leading in academia can support the development of practices and policies that help to sustain women in education and educational leadership at all levels. I agree with Scanlan's (2011) who suggestion that critical spirituality can embolden educational leaders (in public or private institutions) in their struggle to promote equality.

Results

This study delved into the lessons that women can draw from the experiences of other women in higher education leadership in Kenya. This research paper sought to get answers to this pertinent question that researchers and scholars continue to ask or have attempted to answer albeit unsatisfactorily. I became interested in the Kenyan situation because it has not attracted a lot of attention from scholars hence under- researched and least published. This paper presents in detail the attributes of the women trailblazers in higher education leadership in Kenya.

Conclusion

The study revealed that outstanding personality, ambition, self-mastery and leadership identification, education & training, and role models as key ingredients in women success in academia and politics. It emerged that the successful women academicians also spread their networks and experience to positions of influence in society like politics. Performativity emerged as a subtle, unexplained strategy women employ to position themselves for access to male dominated environments. Further it appeared that women who have made it big in academia do not fully disclose their source of inspiration and the intrigues in their career path. I argue that there must be some undisclosed escalator effect for the final push as soon as a woman is located at the right place at the right time. The escalator effect could take the form of luck, pat, or even a vote. However, some themes are outstanding and if built upon can help other women to succeed too. Spirituality, networking, and goodwill are factors consistently mentioned by respondents.

Female attributes of nurturing, being sensitive, empathetic, intuitive, compromising, caring, cooperative, and accommodative are increasingly associated with effective administration. While these characteristics are innate and valuable, women possessing the

qualities of a good leader still face higher attrition and slower career mobility (Growe and Montgomery, 1999).

From the literature review, the researcher was not able to get answers to some pertinent issues affecting women progress in Kenyan public universities. This research paper helped to find answers from the women themselves on what they have done differently to surmount the many challenges ahead of them. Women have to strategize in order to stay afloat in their pursuit for success. Quoting them verbatim gives a very in-depth feeling of what they think about the subject matter. The women interviewed had consensus on key themes like hard work, feminist activism, determination, preparedness, self-esteem, mentorship from both male and female, networking, fighting for space with the men, sacrifice, life work balance, affirmative action, determination, tenacity, prudent financial management, religion, and faith among other traits that they attributed to their success.

Going over the women's narratives for the umpteenth time, I could not help but come up with more questions than answers. I reflected the guts required to be on paths to success and asked myself whether women just perform femininity to get by while "conforming to societal expectations?" or do they gaze towards men to gain access to decision-making rooms and acceptability? On the other hand, is it that they wear male suits pass for strong, effective, and fearless leaders? How do successful women in educational leadership overcome stereotypes and patriarchy? However, they are consumed in the patriarchal flames and tend to let go of femininity. There are rules of the game that one must adhere to and master in order to manage the stereotypes at organizational, societal and family levels. The majority of the respondents outlined strategies and deliberate efforts that worked for them.

Ambition, desire and intelligence make all the difference. To reach where they are, the women attributed their strong desire for change as the major driving force, to escape struggle and poverty. Most participants recall their awareness as they grew up that circumstance had to change. Journey to success starts very early are harsh realities begin to sink. Trajectories are varied but the end justifies the means. Others attribute their being at the right place at the right time to sheer luck. Some women owe it to God's will, through hope and forbearance to forge ahead, a spiritual worldview. This supports the theory that African women harness spirituality and indigenous ways of knowing in approach to successes and challenges of life (Ngunjiri, 2010b). Still others saw the men as sure role models because of their successes and political skills.

The findings of this study also negate earlier conclusions that women were not ambitious enough (Onsongo, 2004). The respondents exhibited an aggressive spirit in fighting for space among men. Also, a very small percentage of the women interviewed appreciated the contribution of feminism to their advancement.

The findings reveal that women in this study just like those in various ranks and disciplines within possessed the required qualifications and experience promotion. They had the ambition, drive and the patience to succeed in the gendered system so the fact that there were fewer women in management is an indication that other factors other than qualifications affected women career mobility. This agrees with a study by Morrison et al (1987) which attributed the low number of women in management position to the "glass ceiling", a transparent barrier that prevents women from moving up the corporate ladder past a certain point. From the interviews, women identified various extras that must be incorporated in their quest for higher positions over and above the

fundamentals. The elements include; activism and collaboration, self-mastery and leadership identity, Education and training, spirituality, mentorship, ambition, goodwill and performativity.

Patricia aimed a jab at patriarchy as she explained that nothing would stand in the way of a determined academic. Successful women do not pay much attention to artificial obstacles, least of all the societal expectations of women and gender role demarcations. It was also apparent that most of those interviewed solidly demarcated lines between professional, familial, and personal responsibilities with separate sets of priorities while keeping nonprofessional matters out of the radar. It emerged that successful women academics adjusted their own expectations and personalities to win where maleness is conceptualized as normative. It is a kind of a situational personality adjustment that applies tough and assertive transactional leadership traits usually associated with maleness. From the study findings, it is clear that very few women could be described as feminists in academia, only a couple attributing their prominence to collaborative movements. Instead, the women view themselves as products of their own hard work, personal ideals, unrelenting fight for space and competitiveness. The majority credit themselves for doing things differently and those around them the support and sacrifices made. None of the respondents attributed their success and location to either feminism or affirmative action or the two third rules. It is not completely surprising that success is not directly attributed to external support because affirmative action is hardly implemented in Kenya. This predicament reinforces the observation by Mama (2002) which states that international conventions are difficult to implement in those countries where authoritarian, anti-democratic regimes, and illegitimate and discredited governments, have used the woman question as a public relations exercise. They may sign and ratify United Nations conventions to get donor funding, but do not implement them. It is not far-fetched to imagine Kenya is in the category of countries described by the Africa's leading feminist researcher.

Although spirituality is a panacea for marginalized groups, only a couple of participants attributed their journeys, success and sustenance to a deity. I am troubled by the insignificance of feminism(s) among successful women academicians. The question one ponders has to do with the place of feminism among the elite in Kenya. At what point does collective action start, end or stop in the societal strata?

Women centered analysis used in this study appropriate for this research which privileges women's voices as they share experiences, challenges and trajectories to their present positions of power and influence. A women-centered approach refers to research which centers its analysis on the personal accounts of women who are taking part in the study (Nicolson 1989). In addition, verbatim extracts have been used in research to emphasize unforeseen conclusions of a study while privileging participant viewpoints through their voices. It has gained prominence over the years and has been used by researchers like Anne Oakley (1979) and Paula Nicolson (1990) both of whom included verbatim extracts from participant responses. Additional data and information was obtained from document review and desk research.

Eagly and Carly (2007) illustrated that it is not simply the glass ceilings that keep women from developing power in organizations but rather a maze of challenges women face at all levels of the organizations where overt barriers are replaced with subtle, insidious and pervasive processes that create and sustain gender differences in work relationships. Paradigm shifts are witnessed

when women reject the notion of guaranteed representation for numbers sake in depicting gender balance, negative view of token promotions or sympathy promotions and all scenarios crafted to demean women's competencies. Findings of this study negate earlier position by Leonard (2001) in which she faults women for their perceived reluctance to be involved in competitive, self-promotional behavior traditionally associated with dominant masculinities. Such views have catalyzed the women's movement and have led to adoption of some gloves off unconventional strategies to get ahead. Leonard (2001) strongly advises women to engage with hidden curriculum of academies like networks, contacts, persistence and political skills has been embraced successfully, going by the findings of this research. Having a backbone is not considered a character flaw. The women in this study have succeeded through a strong sense of passive aggression, enabling environments, professional positioning, all while building bridges with the men i.e. African feminism approach. The women knew what needs to be done in terms of networking, research, role modeling, personality dispositions and the right moment to strike. Women are cautioned against losing femininity described by participants Patricia and Charity as being human:

Believe in yourselves and brace for challenge. It could come sooner therefore stand on guard to conquer the maze of challenges along the way. It can take a little of feminist and a little of masculinity, some hybrid to that could help. Those who have approached leadership and careers differently have succeeded. Be dynamic in spirit and attitude.

At the same time Patricia explained that a human spirit is attractive and draws one to opportunities and to many seeking solutions both in the academia and social spheres in Kenya and beyond. Similarly, Christina stressed on the notion of the self-consciousness: "Believe in yourself, have self-mastery, know your culture and don't allow it to bring you down."

She recognizes the impact of cultural and societal gender role expectations and caution on those that infringe on the freedom and advancement of women. She emphasizes on the self-mastery, knowing what is best for yourself disregarding aspects that bring you down.

This impasse confirms the observation by Mama (2002) which states that international conventions are difficult to implement in those countries where authoritarian, anti-democratic regimes, and illegitimate and discredited governments, have used the woman question as a public relations exercise. They may sign and ratify United Nations conventions to get donor funding, but do not implement them. It is not far-fetched to imagine Kenya is in the category of countries described by the Africa's leading feminist researcher. It therefore calls for subtle and stealth approaches by women academics to fight patriarchy, which is reproduced within institutions of higher learning.

Spirituality is a source of inspiration, hope and benevolence for marginalized groups which only a small number of participants would attribute to their success and sustenance. However it has been observed that spirituality is a vital force that connects African peoples to the rhythms of the universe and their community (Wane, 2006). I argue thatjust as they downplay the contribution of feminism to their success, women participants in this study were reluctant to admit how their faith in deity helped them wade through immense pressures and tensions. It was clear that spirituality is embedded within their performativity to self-present as beyond reproach in negotiating for access male-dominated professions.

Women-centred analysis used in this study appropriate for this research, which privileges women's voices as they share

experiences, challenges and trajectories to their present positions of power and influence. A women-centered approach refers to research, which centers its analysis on the personal accounts of women who are taking part in the study (Nicolson, 1989). In addition, verbatim extracts have been used in research to emphasize unforeseen conclusions of a study while privileging participant viewpoints through their voices. It has gained prominence over the years and has been used by researchers like Anne Oakley (1979) and Paula Nicolson (1990) both of whom included verbatim extracts from participant responses. Additional data and information were obtained from document review and desk research.

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They have to have a mindset change and embrace the sciences, believe in themselves and brace themselves for focus and hard work. I imagine the required mindset at individual level can take any form, shape and direction and shape as long as it can conquer the maze of challenges along the way. It can take a little of feminist and a little of masculinity, some hybrid to that could help. Those who have approached leadership and careers differently have succeeded.

The idea of shifting gears to adjust identity is suggestive of fluidity of gender as a performative act which is made more or less salient based on one's performance. As Judith Butler (2009)explains, we act, walk, speak, and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman. Accordingly, gender is a set of actions learned through cultural socialization, narratives, language, and other performative acts, which conform to or reject societal expectations of gender. One persona Patricia explained that a humane spirit is attractive and draws one to opportunities and to many seeking solutions in both the academia and social spheres in Kenya and beyond.

Data gathered from the field suggests that women craft situational strategies than conform to and employ a spectrum of tactics, deliberately and inadvertently to get to leadership. The universal premise and anchor has been to ignore the naysayers, the rhetoric and come up with strategies of self-presentation and positioning. Women leaders in academia ought to facilitate gender balance through a feminist framework even if they do not consider themselves feminist. Respondents suggested various pragmatic strategies at personal, societal and institutional levels. Strategies that have propelled women are consistent with individual career

growth plans, and with feminist organizing to challenge male dominance.

At the institutional level a social justice leadership would be the panacea for rigid structures that are installed to serve a few. According to Burkinshaw (2015), women's representation in power positions is considered significant for four major reasons: one, for social justice that advocates institutions to be just and treat people with equality; second, for equity and parity that focus on the issue of gender pay and opportunity gap; third, for enhancing the quality of leadership that can be facilitated by diverse practices; and fourth, for economy and business, as organizations with equality and inclusion are looked upon and perceived in a positive light.

Data Availability

Data available at the Department of Social Justice Education at Ontario Institute of Studies in Education, University of Toronto.

Conflicts of Interest

The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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