



A Female-Agency Perspective on Female Political Leadership in Africa

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A paucity of research studies explore agency utilised by female political leaders to navigate spaces predominantly occupied by male counterparts. The main objective of the study was to explore female-agency fostering the ascension of women to leadership positions in Kenya, an East African country. This study examined the lived experiences of Kenyan female political leaders using a qualitative exploratory approach implemented by means of interviews. Findings indicated that female-agency with specific reference to political leadership centres on eight strategies, *inter alia*, formal educational attainment, utilising formal educational leadership opportunities, personal development and lifelong learning, social support systems, mentorship, challenging gender roles and stereotypes, leadership traits and tactics. Female participation in leadership remains essential to ensure balanced decision-making and public outcomes. However, African women remain under-represented in leadership positions, in particular within the political sphere. Male dominance and gender stereotypes have been identified as significant obstacles hindering women from accessing leadership positions. Strategies to improve female participation in leadership positions with specific reference to the political sphere should be based on empirical findings. Moreover, female-agency research could be perceived as a strategy to challenge gender stereotyping.

Key words: *Leadership, African women leaders, education, political leadership, female-agency.*



1. Introduction

“The concept of leadership in Africa has always lent credence to the male-agency. The phenomenon of politics has been a straight forward and strictly male concern in which change is resisted even till contemporary times.” This statement from Oladejo (2015: 175) encapsulates the perception and challenges faced by African women especially when accessing political leadership. Rohini and Ford (2012) asserted that while few women have ascended to the pinnacle of political leadership, for example Angela Merkel viz. German Chancellor and the Brazilian President, Dilma Rousseff, less than 19% of legislators internationally are women. Hilal (2015) furthermore shed light by noting that 11 women ascended to the highest office in their respective countries viz. Bangladesh, Dominica, Iceland, Ireland, Nicaragua, Norway, and Switzerland. It is pivotal for women to engage in political leadership and public decision-making in order to address gender concerns and imbalance as well as instil good governance principles (United Nations, 2005). A large number of African nations have faced military regimes and dictatorships which have been detrimental to social and economic development (Rotberg, 2004). Withanalage (2014) argued that achieving prosperous reconstruction and sustained peace in post-conflict countries require an emphasis on gender. Female leadership traits which underscore consensus building, information sharing and motivation, are the types of leadership traits (Rosener, 2011) that are requisite in many African nations to counter predominant patriarchal leadership cultures. Yet, African women are largely absent from political leadership positions, an absence which seemingly remains set to become a recurring trend as it stems from detrimental perceptions of female leaders from both genders (Kiamba, 2008).

Previous research studies have identified male dominance of political systems, culture, economic considerations, threats of violence, lack of educational attainment and gender stereotyping as significant barriers for female leadership in Africa (see, for example Kamau 2010; Kassilly & Onkware 2010). Given that political leadership in Africa remains a patriarchal system (Kassilly & Onkware, 2010), the main barriers identified stem from the aforementioned male dominance and the stereotyping of women as less effective leaders in comparison to their male counterparts (Hejase, Haddad, Hamdar, Massoud & Farha, 2013). Despite this, a number of women have attained leadership positions. For example, in Rwanda women occupy 49% of parliamentary positions (Skaine, 2008) and ascribed to robust political support, but also to structural changes brought about by genocide and institutional chaos that resulted indicative of specific enabling factors i.e. female-agency present in the lived experience of successful female political leaders. Prado and Fleith (2018) noted that research on female-agency with specific reference to women at the pinnacle of their professions or occupying positions of social prestige previously held by men are deemed strategies implemented to challenge gender stereotyping. Nonetheless, there is a paucity of literature underscoring empowerment strategies for African female leaders (Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009).



In light of the above, the research under study will explore agency utilised by female political leaders to navigate spaces previously predominantly occupied by male counterparts. Therefore, the main objective of the study was to explore female-agency fostering the ascension of women to leadership positions in Kenya, an East African country. Kenya has been selected ascribed to its representativeness of the sub-Saharan African region, characteristic of similarities underscoring female political participation across Africa. More specifically, the country is largely patriarchal as is the case with many African states (Kasilly & Onkware, 2010). Female citizenry tends to have limited access to vocational and educational opportunities which further impacts on the ability to access leadership and public decision-making (Maloiy, 2018). The post-colonial Kenyan culture is also representative of other African countries. It is acknowledged that post-colonial African culture is influenced by colonialism and missionary education (Ngunjiri, 2010). It is against this background that Kenya has been selected for this study on female political leadership.

2. Literature review

The under-representation of women in leadership within numerous sectors has been noted by various scholars (see, for example McCann and Wilson 2012; Offermann & Foley, 2020; Prado & Fleith, 2018). More specifically, the patriarchal and androcentric nature of political systems present a significant barrier to female leadership (Oladejo, 2015). Lister (cited in Sweetman, 2000: 3) suggested that “admission procedures, rules and working culture reflect their roots in Western Europe, three centuries ago, when citizens were assumed to be male and white.” Women often find themselves in an ‘old boys club’ and are forced to acknowledge and play by implicit rules rather than challenge them (Sweetman, 2000). Oledjo (2015) postulated that the political structure in Africa remains a hindrance for women accessing leadership positions. These structures are often described as being “one-party, authoritarian, and military regimes” (Foster, 1993: 110). The stated structures tend to favour the agentic nature of males which emphasise assertiveness and aggression similar to those favoured in organisational settings (Kiseleva, 2018). Afore mentioned underscore masculine gender-role traits viz. assertiveness, aggression and ambition. Ward, Popson and DiPaolo (2012) explained that leadership literature associate leadership styles with personality characteristics. For example, leadership traits often identified by literature subsume emotional intelligence, masculine gender-role traits, and self-esteem. Offermann and Foley (2020) referred to leadership personality characterised by assertiveness, strategic thinking, and decisiveness. Lounsbury, Sundstrom, Gibson, Loveland, and Drost (2016) in a sample consisting of 85 000 (n = 85 000) respondents identified the following leadership traits viz. extraversion, neuroticism/emotional stability, openness to experience, agreeableness, conscientiousness, assertiveness, optimism, ambition, and customer-service orientation.

Kiseleva (2018) noted that women seem to face a ‘double edged sword’, as there is a long-standing and widespread belief that male traits are consistent with leadership. At the same time,



socialised feminine traits such as docility, place women at a disadvantage, as it is often perceived as weakness (Evans, 2010). Oledajo (2015: 177) noted that the emergence of female leadership in Africa found expression in the concept of 'elderhood' expecting leaders to engage in selfless activities for social development. Reflecting on leadership strategies utilised by women for political mobilisation in colonial West Africa, Oledajo (2015) asserted that proletarian mobilisation as articulated by female leaders formed part of transformational leadership that stood against colonialism and imperialism to attain African self-governance. Contrariwise, attempting to adopt male leadership traits might elicit a negative response and produce internal conflict ascribed to role and gender mismatch as these traits are incongruent with the female stereotype (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Moreover, Odhiambo (2011) asserted that education is critical in reinforcing gender stereotypes through socialisation as well as leaving women ill-equipped for leadership roles. Oledajo (2015) proclaimed that formal education introduced during the colonial era altered the influence exerted by African women pre-colonialism. Weiss, cited in Tamale (2000: 10) argued that while missionary education during the colonial era brought schools to villages that had no educational infrastructure, an identified drawback was that it tended to leave a negative impact on African women as it was mainly aimed at fostering home-making skills. Similarly, the post-colonial African education system primarily offered options that prepared graduates for domestic roles leaving African women unprepared for leadership positions (Tamale, 2000). Oledajo (2015: 175) opines that the colonial government transferred their western 'Victorian ideals' which adversely effected the status of women in the colonial era, exacerbating the marginalisation of African women that already existed. Kamau (2008) examined the experiences of female political leaders in Kenya, and concluded that the majority of participants developed leadership skills during adolescence and the experiences of hardship shaped focus areas once leadership positions were obtained. Similarly, Madsen (2007b) found that successful female college presidents were avid readers, enjoyed school and had influential female mentors. Beaman, Duflo, Pande and Topalova (2012) noted that mentors and role models challenge prevalent gender stereotypes and foster female leadership aspirations.

3. Conceptualising female-agency

Arnot, Jeffery, Case-Heyfod and Noronha (2012) defined female-agency as an umbrella term to describe the articulation of opinion (*viz.* communication), autonomy and decision-making. Daniels (2018) explored and defined female-agency in an African context as the ability to successfully influence one's external environment through knowledge generation and the application of the said knowledge to alter circumstances. Daniels (2018) furthermore underscored agentic capabilities as embracing realities while fashioning exit strategies or navigating said realities. Female-agency is used interchangeably with empowerment strategies and a review of the corpus of knowledge in the African context underscore the said in relation to sexuality (see, for example Arnfred, 2004; Wardlow, 2004) with a paucity of literature



emphasising an organisational context. Ascribed to the lack of empirical research evidence inductive reasoning was utilised to systematically develop theory in social settings which can be categorised as grounded theory (Khan, 2014).

4. Theoretical lens

The study will be framed within African Feminism. African feminism offers a framework to counter challenges faced, a framework concerned with aspects unique to the African context, and questions facets of African culture without denigrating it (Mekgwe, 2003). Moreover, the framework critiques colonialism and seeks to redefine dominant imagery of African women (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010; Daniels, 2018). With the purpose of highlighting “the power and agency of African women in particular to theorize from their cultures and lived experiences to produce [indigenous] knowledge that is contextually relevant, builds relationships, heals the self, the community and the larger socio-economic context” (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010: 619). African feminism fundamentally acknowledges the various realities faced by African women across the continent necessitating an appropriate framework. Against this background, there is a recognition that African women employ various mechanisms to challenge patriarchal attitudes and structures. Day (2008) and Yeboah (2008) identify, *inter alia*, traditional female institutions, concepts of sisterhood, gender, and motherhood as a means of female empowerment, which can navigate patriarchal systems and attitudes, particularly in male dominant areas such as political leadership. African feminism from a Kenyan stance is premised on feminist expression devoted to real life experiences, while proposing an inclusive and collaborative theoretical framework that includes working with Kenyan men to address gender imbalances in the given milieu.

5. Research Methodology

A qualitative research approach was adopted for the study to gain in-depth insight into participants lived experiences. A resilient facet of qualitative research remains the ability to elaborate on the perspective and contextual realities of participants (Shikweni, Schurink & Van Wyk, 2019). This is important as a lack thereof has been a core criticism of Western feminism by African scholars. Additionally, Wane (2011) asserted that African women are the custodians of indigenous knowledge. In keeping with a female-agency perspective, the research under discussion consider Kenyan female political leaders as the custodians and “agents of knowledge” (Landman, 2006: 430) best suited to speak on leadership experiences, as participants are considered knowledgeable on how to successfully navigate the African leadership landscape.

The study was conducted in Kenya, with a relatively small sample consisting of eighteen participants (n = 18). Non-random sampling specifically purposive convenient sampling was used to generate the sample. Per se, participants were officially designated political leaders and



deemed to have first-hand experience including a member of parliament (n = 2; 11.11%), a member of parliament aspirant (n = 2; 11.11%), a nominated member of parliament (n = 2; 11.11%), the chair of a national women's organisation and political associations (n = 2; 11.11%), commissioner (n = 2; 11.11%), activist (n = 2; 11.11%), councillor (n = 2; 11.11%), senator, (n = 2; 11.11%), county women's representative (n = 1; 5.55%) and a Deputy Governor (n = 1; 5.55%). Participants' age ranged from those born in colonial Kenya to leaders born in post-colonial contemporary Kenya. The colonial era consists of birth dates before independence in 1963, while the independence era consists of birth dates from 1963 until the end of Kenyatta's regime 1978. The post-independence era starts from the end of the Kenyatta regime 1978 up to today. With reference to marital status, the majority of the sample were married (n = 9; 50%), followed by those respondents who were single (n = 4; 22.22%), engaged (n = 2; 11.11%), separated or divorced (n = 2; 11.11%) and widowed (n = 1; 5.55%). The sampling method resulted in diverse experiences and robust results.

Personal interviews provided an opportunity to explore participants' insight, to offer a holistic picture of perceptions, by illuminating circumstances as a result of robust narrative information (Shikweni et al. 2019). Interviews were recorded using a digital recorder, except for one where detailed notes were taken. The duration of the interviews was between 30 to 90 minutes, depending on the time availed by the participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow for natural dialogue to occur, as this offered "greater breadth" than structured interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2008: 129). A phenomenographic approach was utilised to analyse transcribed data which underscored participant's experiences and involved comprehending and evaluating qualitative data by categorisation thereof into themes and sub-themes (Rubin, 2005). Data were transcribed verbatim, to gain a comprehensive understanding thereof. The interview transcripts were read and re-read, and discerning questions were posed by the data (Merrill & West, 2009). A two-pronged approach ensued including transcript production as well as identifying, categorising and coding key concepts. Secondly, concepts were evaluated and linked, ultimately providing an assessment of the given phenomenon (Rubin & Ruben, 2005). As qualitative research lends itself to bias, researcher triangulation was utilised to ensure accuracy of the research findings.

Standard ethical protocol was observed. Participants were provided with a consent form and a signed consent was mandatory to audio tape interviews. Moreover, the aim and objective of the research undertaken was explained and participants were ensured of anonymity and associated confidentiality.

6. Results

Female-agency in the context of the research reported on refers to strategies utilised by female political leaders to navigate spaces previously predominantly occupied by male counterparts (see Daniels, 2018). The findings reported on in this paper are divided into eight themes i.e.



formal educational attainment, utilising formal educational opportunities, personal development and lifelong learning, social support systems, mentorship, challenging gender roles and stereotypes, leadership traits, as well as tactics.

6.1. Formal educational attainment

Findings indicated that formal educational qualifications provided credibility and recognition. Additionally, through formal qualifications, professional avenues were open to participants. One participant reflected:

'[...] I managed to enjoy school very much and if you enjoy school then you pass don't you. If you pass then you are going to privileged places, not everybody went to Makerere and that also is quite an experience. What I am saying is that education itself, by itself thrusts you in those days to leadership really without deliberately thinking that you are going there.'

An excerpt from another respondent confirmed previously mentioned:

'I have a Masters in Development studies and I have a very good CV and that enabled me to get this position because as a Deputy Governor you actually needed to have a degree so that was for me enabling.'

6.2. Utilising formal educational opportunities

Educational institutions provided formal opportunities for leadership development through positions such as class captain and head girl. One participant acknowledged:

'... in school really I would say the opportunities were there to encourage leadership and you know throughout my school life I was head girl in all [the] schools that I went to. At University I was representative of our unit.'

6.3 Personal development and lifelong learning

Personal development facilitates fostering critical skills required for political leadership viz. decision-making skills, knowledge seeking, self-discipline, integrity, communication and continuous learning to mention a few. Educational opportunities were seen to enable personal development. This sentiment was stated as follows:

'[.....]I think education is very enabling because really it is about decision making and education really helps when it comes to making decisions. It is about policy making so education is a very important factor because you need to have some kind of knowledge, or skills in terms of seeking knowledge.....'



Another respondent explained that:

'one thing that you know that we were taught in school was about integrity, integrity in coming from the idea that you must be whole and being the opposite of being corrupt where bits are rotting and falling off you know. It is the integrity of the person, and integrity in the way you make decisions, doing the right thing whether anybody is watching or not.'

Moreover, participating in informal activities such as drama and debate provided essential skills, such as public speaking and communication skills, including building confidence. Capacity building such as political training also served to further develop participants' leadership skills. As one respondent explained:

'I think that's one of the benefits that I had in terms of my education you know issues around speaking [at] the Kenya music festival, performing in public this was all very much encouraged so that if you have to stand up and speak in public then you, [...] might experience that moment of panic but you will know how to deal with it.'

6.4. Social support systems

Social support systems such as involvement of parents and extended family was important to female-agency. Parents through their support of education allowed participants to effectively engage and complete formal education. The accomplishment of formal education is significant, given that education remains a means of establishing credibility and accessing professional avenues. One participant reflected:

'My father on the other hand has also been very supportive. The effort he made to make sure when school close somebody has been sent to pick me or he has come to pick me, or they have connected with school where I will be dropped to ensure I go back [and] forth, to and fro to school, it just called for an understanding father who appreciates education.'

Social support systems were especially pivotal as cultural beliefs regarding the 'usefulness' of sending girls to school was noted in most cases. An excerpt to this effect subsumes:

'.....and also not [being] educated, many young women don't get the education because of the background and also social issue[s] in the culture. [For example] another challenge from my community is early marriages and going through Female Genital Mutilation which are very big challenges for girls.'



6.5. Mentorship

Most participants identified teachers as role models and mentors, motivating them to aspire to greater vocational heights. Teachers also provided career guidance, and encouraged participants to choose certain career paths. Sentiments to this effect included:

'And then I come to high school and of course my teachers were instrumental. I can think of in particular Mr. T, the one who made me choose law. He was a Ugandan teacher I wonder what happened to him, many times I think about him and I just wish I was able to tell him thank you.'

Another respondent illustrated that:

'My High school teacher believed in me, defended me many times, she enhanced my abilities and helped me in securing a scholarship which shaped me.'

6.6. Challenging gender roles and stereotypes

Participants discussed positive socialisation which instilled confidence and built self-esteem. This sense of self-confidence was invaluable to female political leaders especially in countering patriarchal beliefs. One participant explained:

'One thing I appreciate of my parents were they didn't make me feel that I am different from the boys no we would do the same. I saw my brothers doing the chores that girls do. Actually it never occurred to me that I was a girl, unless only to be circumcised that's when now I saw myself as a girl but as for getting my space no we were all equal and my mother really encouraged me not to look down on myself [.....]'

Another respondent elucidated:

'The day my step-sister pierced my ears my father was very mad because he said people who are educated didn't pierce their ears, so he wanted us to leave some cultural practices so that we could be educated.'

6.7. Leadership traits

Leadership literature relates leadership with personality characteristics also referred to as leadership traits. Leadership traits often displayed encompass emotional intelligence, assertiveness, ambition and self-esteem. Respondents presented some of these leadership traits which should ideally be fostered part and parcel of female-agency. Excerpts to this effect included:



'...every time we go to a debate, you could hear one man saying: 'No, a woman can't, why should we listen to a woman other than listening to me.' So I kept fighting [to be] somebody, I am not just a woman; I am not your woman, your woman is at home.'

The quotation above is indicative of assertiveness as displayed by respondents. Ambition to achieve and perform was illustrated in the following excerpt:

'.....in leadership a woman has always got to prove that she can, they keep you on your toes. That's why women leaders perform because you have to make sure [you do] if you don't they will all say enkitok [a woman] what is she doing?'

Another excerpt underscoring self-esteem noted that:

'...as for getting my space no we were all equal and my mother really encouraged me not to look down on myself [.....]'

However, socialised female traits, such as docility often place women at a disadvantage a participant explained:

'[...] in Maasailand we have this maybe in other places to a girl is not supposed to look at somebody's eyes, [for example] an older person or anybody who is older you look down. If you look up they say it is rude meiyata nganyet [you have no shame] and so the girls are always looking down [...]'

6.8. Tactics

Respondents made mention of strategies to adapt to the political environment. One such strategy subsumes adopting male characteristics to be successful. However, female political leaders are penalised if they do adopt such personas, as stated, it would be inconsistent with the ascribed roles and attributes of women in society. As such one participant explained:

'Women tend to behave like men so that men buy their language and the way they behave. Men meet in the bars in the evening, women we don't meet in bars so I think some mimic. I can't say all women but few women try to change to be like men, reason like men, and we need to change that.'

Another tactic identified is to gain the support of male counterparts. This was consistent with an African feminist approach which aims at working together with male counterparts to address gender disparities. One respondent noted that:

'We need to lobby the men and I think that's why we are very few women in parliament, in leadership position[s].'



One more tactic put forward is to foster political goodwill to counter patriarchal attitudes and male dominance in leadership. One participant made the following recommendation:

‘Political will is a great enabler especially when you find a key leader who is true to women’s empowerment and is willing to run with the women. That’s the most enabling thing you will find that.’

Communication was also identified as an adaptation approach as one respondent explained:

‘Having to go to the highest level you learn a lot through vital interaction with others.’

7. Discussion and conclusion

Results identified eight strategies utilised by respondents to overcome significant barriers i.e. male dominance of political systems, culture, economic considerations, threats of violence, lack of educational attainment and gender stereotyping (see, for example Kamau 2010; Kassilly & Onkware 2010). Formal educational attainment imparts credibility and recognition to women in leadership. This finding is consistent with research conducted by Oledajo (2015), indicating education influences the social mobility of women. Correspondently, Arnot et al. (2012) confirmed that educational attainment is a significant contributor to female-agency. Secondly, the utilisation of formal educational leadership opportunities was emphasised. Kamau (2008) examined the experiences of female political leaders in Kenya, concluded that the majority of the participant’s leadership skills were developed during adolescence. Madsen (2007a) pointed out a paucity of literature regarding adolescent experiences of leadership which is also the case in the African context. Additionally, leadership opportunities should ideally be diversified to include academic, political, and social clubs. These findings were supported by Madsen (2007a) who found that female leaders were presented with more leadership opportunities at school.

Moreover, social support systems and mentorship came to the fore in the analysis. Results are confirmed by Madsen (2007b) emphasising the importance of influential mentors in the lives of female leaders. Beaman et al. (2012) noted that mentors and role models challenge prevalent gender stereotypes and foster female leadership aspirations. The aforementioned affirmed results with specific reference to challenging of gender roles and stereotypes by participants as well as extended significant other i.e. social support systems, role models and mentors. Prevalence of leadership traits viz. assertiveness, self-esteem and ambition were also reported. Results presented are in accordance with previous research findings by Offerman and Foley (2020) identifying assertiveness, Beaman et al. (2016) underscoring ambition as well as Ward et al. (2012) emphasising self-esteem. Pursuantly, findings confirmed Evan’s (2010) assertion that socialised female traits, such as docility often place women at a disadvantage. Findings also indicated that access to education and the lack of quality education still remains a barrier for many women. This finding corresponds with many scholars’ assertions that education in Kenya ill-equips women for leadership, remains a challenge for accessing leadership (Oduol,



2008). Fostering of leadership traits should be encouraged by reviewing educational curriculum in Africa to ensure that it is adequately preparing adolescents for leadership positions and developing leadership traits (Mullen & Tuten, 2004).

Political leadership is still considered a male sphere with women often incurring social penalties for participation. Oduol (2008) proposes female leaders should acknowledge and accept their various roles and characteristics incorporating a balanced and holistic female leadership style. Furthermore, findings verified the assertion by Eagly and Wood (2012) that in order to be successful an individual must adhere to prescribed gender roles. This idea dovetails with the tenets of African feminism proposing that a plethora of institutions empower women in Africa. These institutions can also be used to navigate patriarchal structures and develop a unique African women's leadership style (Maloiy, 2018). Lastly, participants revealed that internalised strategies should be adopted to adapt to the political environment, for example, gaining the support of male counterparts including political goodwill from key male leaders to counter patriarchal leadership and advance female political leadership. The aforementioned were consistent with an African feminist approach which aims at working together with male counterparts to address gender disparities (Daniels, 2018). Similarly, effective long-term strategies focusing on the youth towards countering patriarchal structures and gender stereotypes should be implemented. With this said, future research endeavors are required underscoring experiences of African women in the face of patriarchal oppression, to enrich and broaden feminist discourse in particular from an African leadership perspective underscoring the pursuit of female-agency.

It is against the above discussion that the following practical recommendations emerged:

- There is a need to promote the profiles of female leaders by featuring the same in local newspapers and on television in order for political leadership to gradually be seen as a viable pathway for women.
- It is important for women's political associations in Africa to identify and nurture aspiring female political leaders. This may include recruiting talented girls in secondary schools and offering them internships and mentoring within the associations.
- In order to enhance self-confidence among young women, opportunities to undertake activities such as sports, drama, debating and public speaking in schools should be emphasised.
- Girls also need to engage with formal and informal leadership activities such as becoming school leaders and participating in Girl Guides.
- A review of the African educational curriculum to evaluate whether it provides girls the opportunity to develop aptitude and leadership skills is imperative.



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