

Motivators and barriers related to women's leadership advancement in Higher Education: the case of Zambia

Dr Chitalu Kabwe, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, Georgia, USA

Dr Christine Phiri-Mushibwe, Unicaf University Lusaka, Zambia

Abstract

The paper aims to explore motivators and barriers related to women's leadership advancement within Higher Education? The study adopts a qualitative approach, data was collected through semi-structured interviews among academic leaders in higher education institutions in Zambia. The paper seeks to make theoretical contributions in three major ways. Firstly, it advances the understanding of theory as regards the causes of barriers to women's leadership advancement within the context of a developing country, Zambia. Secondly, from the feminist perspective, the paper seeks to demonstrate the unconscious gender discrimination propensities that advances the resistance related to women's leadership advancement as unconsciously applied. The demonstration of discrimination indirectly (unconsciously) in the absence of explicitly (consciously) objections to the traditional belief that 'women should remain at home'. Thirdly, taking into account the historical and cultural context, the paper seeks to illustrate how gender divisions of labour limits the knowledge of women's competence in employment and politics

Introduction

Recent studies on women and leadership and management positions in higher education institutions (HEI) in Zambia are mainly occupied by men. This shows a near male monopoly and an almost masculine hegemony (Njobvu & Yang, 2014; White et al., 2012). Despite various interventions, the gender gap remains. The gender-bias situation in HEI is not only a problem in Zambia. Globally, even though there are now more women progressing to leadership positions in HEI, gender imbalance in higher education leadership is still a global issue because the progress towards equity has been very slow and uneven (Airini et al., 2011; Davidson & Burke, 2004). Studies conducted in Kenya also show that Academic women in Kenyan universities as elsewhere in the world continue to experience cultural barriers to entry into leadership positions and both direct and indirect discrimination (Waweru, 2018; Nyangau, 2019). According to Mumba (2019), the gender inequality in HEI leadership is not due to a lack of qualified women but rather systemic barriers that prevent them from advancing into leadership positions.

The paper seeks to answer the question: What are the motivators and barriers to women's leadership advancement? The paper seeks to make theoretical contributions in three major ways. Firstly, it advances the understanding of theory as regards the causes of barriers to women's leadership advancement within the context of a developing country, Zambia. Secondly, from the feminist perspective, the paper seeks to demonstrate the unconscious gender discrimination propensities that advances the resistance related to women's leadership advancement as unconsciously applied. The demonstration of discrimination indirectly (unconsciously) in the absence of explicitly (consciously) objections to the traditional belief that 'women should remain at home'. Thirdly, taking into account the historical and cultural context, the paper seeks to illustrate how gender divisions of labour limited the knowledge of women's competence in employment and politics (Evans, 2015).

Research Background

This state of affairs has raised questions and answers are sought about how to fully integrate woman so that they can fully and effectively participate in HEIs leadership and management (Macwang'i et al., 2007). There is indeed a considerable number of women who meet the minimum qualifications and experience to get into these sought-after positions of leadership and management in HEI. However, owing to various reasons, these women do not just seem to manage. There are several factors which might be attributed to the failure of women's advancement into leadership positions in HEI. Firstly, there are issues to do with cultural traditions as with most African countries. In this case, Academic women in Kenyan universities as elsewhere in the world continue to experience cultural barriers to entry into leadership positions and both direct and indirect discrimination.

Secondly, scarcity of women in senior academic leadership has been attributed to several reasons emanating from the diverse forms of gender-discrimination arising from a male-dominated culture including the 'glass ceiling', 'labyrinth' and indeed the 'pipeline' theories where women are victims (Eagly et al, 2009; Arfken et al., 2004; Oakley, 2000). Bwalya (2011) arguing on female representation in Zambian politics equally cites male-dominant culture, discriminatory adoption practices, and cultural constraints that confine women into gender specific roles. Such restraints are similar to those noted above. In 1997 Zambia signed the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) declaration on gender and development to meet the target of 30% by the end of 2005. Regrettably, until now, Zambia falls far short of the target of the 30 percent representation of women in politics and other decision making positions.

Research conducted by Witika (2016, unpublished), of the 120 teachers investigated, 98 had not been prompted in the past 11 years. An interesting finding from the same research shows that 78% of the respondents were not comfortable to be managed by a woman, a situation that seems to confirm that there are diverse forms of gender-discrimination arising from a male dominated culture. There seems to be *unconscious gender-discrimination* that tends to be practiced anyhow despite the call for affirmative action at different levels in the Ministry of General Education (MoGE). As of 2024, Zambia has 19 public universities and 141 registered private higher education institutions, totalling 160 universities. Of the 53 registered private universities in Zambia, there's only two female Vice Chancellors and 4 women serving as deputy Vice Chancellors. The situation is not different in the 19 public universities where women in leadership positions are under-represented (MoGE, 2024). Evidently, the representation of female vice chancellors in Zambian universities remains extremely low. In 2012, Hellicy Ngambi became the first female vice chancellor of a public university in Zambia when she was appointed to lead Mulungushi University (Inside Higher Ed, 2012). Additionally, Gertrude Mwangala Akapelwa has served as the vice chancellor of the Victoria Falls University of Technology since its inception. Presently, there are only four vice chancellors (presidents) of the universities collectively, there is a very high male dominance.

Despite these milestones, gender disparity in Higher Education leadership persists. Over a period of 44 years, the University of Zambia had no female vice chancellors and only one female deputy vice chancellor, who served for three years (Scholarlink Institute, n.d.). This aligns with broader trends in sub-Saharan Africa, where only about 2.5% of vice chancellors are women (ESSA, n.d.).

In 1993 a group of women Vice Chancellors conducted a research on Women in Higher Education Management due to the continued underrepresentation of women in management position. The researchers described the system as one which was patriarchal. The findings of the research demonstrated the continued relegation of women to non-decision making positions despite the strides women have made in many areas of public life. The global picture also shows men outnumbering women at about five to one at middle management level and at about twenty or more to one at senior management level (UNESCO, 1993). The research further noted that the positions of women deans and professors were still in the minority group and the women vice-chancellors a rarity. This research was conducted in 1993 but the findings noted still apply in contemporary Zambia as noted by the statistics above.

Our traditional roots seem to have a strong hold on the progression of women. The gender gap is distinct and cannot be understated. The cultural tradition reticence strongly contributes to such a disposition as the tendency tend to worm itself into workplaces which are dominated by man. Mushibwe (2010) argues that deep seated socio-cultural traditions play a significant role in encumbering female education later alone assuming of positions of influence in a male dominated system. She contends that patrilineal groupings are strongholds of the patriarchal proclivities and cultural traditional attitudes that tend not to recognize women as equal partners. Such a situation calls for a research to understand the motivators and barriers that are related to women's leadership advancement in HEI.

Women and higher education leadership in Zambia

From the statistics presented in the background, it clearly shows that women are clearly not considered in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in Zambia. The general assumption that

teaching is an acceptable women's work has been defended by such authors as Gannerud (2001), who claims that there seem to be a long-lasting appreciation of the relationship between teaching as 'women's work'. He further relates the profession to mothering hence making women the best teachers. On the other hand, Hutchings (200) argues that male teachers do not make good teachers due to the conflicting models of masculinity. Such discourses tend to feminise the profession of teaching however the positions of influence seem to be dominated by men. For example, in 2014 there were 100,813.00 teachers in Zambia, 48656 male teachers and 52157 female teachers. It is easy to see that female teachers outnumber their male counterpart and innately the situation should be the same at management level.

Reay and Ball (2000) have argued about the 'naturalness' with which women care and tend to 'do' things. Such 'naturalness' and the related construction of women as a homogeneous category should contribute to the workforce. Eurostat (2003) and Mills, (2005) equally contend of the female under representation at management level despite the profession being female dominated. Such an argument is seconded by Mulenge (2002) who gives the picture of Botswana as the same with women constituting the majority of the workforce but under represented at the managerial and decision making positions in the education system.

Commenting on the 'domestic ideology', that assumes women more naturally disposed to nurturing than men, Drudy (2008), notes that the traditional gender roles women find themselves in societies tend to consign women to the domestic domain as mere caregivers. While there is nothing wrong with the position of a care giver nor its nurturing disposition, it should not be presumed that women do not have the faculties to function at a decision-making position. Mushibwe (2016) in an article on 'The SMART Woman Philosophy', argues that the power structure in the home should not militate against the progression of

women. That domestic power structure should not worm itself in workplaces and dictate the function and position of the woman. Many writers, such as Swain (2005), agree that immense values lies in educating a woman by broadening and developing her assurance and self-determination to interact and compete with others. It promotes her understanding of different viewpoints and facilitates coordination. If a woman attains such an education, why should she fall short of the requirements of a higher position of decision making? Human Resource Management is not a gender sensitive role and hence women are capable of holding higher management positions.

Feminism-conceptual framework

Feminism is a highly-contested genera of theories due to its political stance of changing the social position of women and raising the consciousness about different issues that concern women in all spheres of life. Commenting on feminism, Best (2003 p.147) maintains that feminism is not just about equal rights but about one seeking to raise “consciousness about a diverse range of issues in relation to identity and hierarchy”.

Feminist theory has been adopted because of the points discussed. First, feminist theory offers a critical framework for examining how gendered power relations are embedded in higher education institutions. These institutions have historically been patriarchal, reproducing gender inequality through both formal structures and informal cultures (hooks, 2000; Morley, 2013). Feminist theorists argue that leadership models in universities often privilege masculine traits such as competitiveness and individualism, marginalizing alternative, more inclusive approaches (Blackmore, 1999). Ahmed (2012) argues that diversity and inclusion initiatives in universities often fail because institutions remain invested in performative equity rather than structural transformation. Feminist theory calls for

redefining leadership to emphasize care, collaboration, and justice (Blackmore, 1999; O'Connor, 2020).

Secondly, feminist theory challenges dominant, masculinized definitions of leadership. It calls for leadership based on relational power, shared decision-making, and collective responsibility (Blackmore, 1999). These values disrupt the “heroic” or “top-down” leadership norms prevalent in universities. Women are disproportionately impacted by structural barriers, such as: lack of mentorship, unequal distribution of caregiving responsibilities and gender-biased promotion metrics that undervalue service and teaching (O'Meara et al., 2017). These challenges disrupt women's progression into leadership positions and result in their underrepresentation in senior roles. However, feminist theory explicitly aims to disrupt the status quo as it is a critical and normative theory which seeks social transformation and justice.

Thirdly, feminist scholars advocate for (i) transparent promotion processes (O'Connor, 2020); (ii) gender-sensitive mentorship programs and (iii) accountability structures like gender audits (Morley, 2013). These reforms emphasize that institutional transformation—not individual adaptation—is necessary for sustainable change. Feminist theory questions the illusion of meritocracy in academia, revealing how criteria for promotion, tenure, and leadership are constructed within gendered and racialized norms (Ahmed, 2012). These norms disadvantage women, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. Therefore, feminist analysis exposes how women's academic contributions—especially in teaching, mentoring, and service—are often undervalued in leadership assessments (O'Meara et al., 2017).

Fourthly, a key strength of feminist theory—especially intersectional feminism (Crenshaw, 1989)—is its attention to how multiple social identities (race, gender, class, sexuality)

intersect to shape leadership experiences. Applying feminist theory helps uncover the diverse challenges faced by women, especially Black, Indigenous, and women of color in academia, who are often underrepresented and marginalized in leadership roles (Bhopal & Jackson, 2013).

Lastly, feminist theory allows for evaluating women's lived experiences. Feminist theory values women's narratives and lived experiences as legitimate and essential sources of knowledge (Hooks, 2000). This is especially important in academic leadership research, where women's voices have often been marginalized or silenced. Feminist-informed methodologies (e.g., feminist ethnography or narrative inquiry) prioritize agency, reflexivity, and empowerment.

Feminist theory provides a robust framework for analyzing and addressing the systemic barriers that inhibit women's advancement into leadership roles in higher education. By challenging patriarchal structures, redefining leadership values, and advocating for inclusive institutional reforms, feminist theory enables a more just, equitable, and diverse academic environment. Furthermore, its intersectional approach ensures that solutions consider the complex experiences of all women—not just those already positioned close to power.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative approach, data was collected through semi-structured interviews among academic leaders and faculty members in higher education institutions in Zambia. Participants will be identified through purposive sampling which is a 'non-probability sampling method where the researcher has a clear idea of what sample units are needed and then approaches potential sample members to assess whether they meet eligibility criteria' (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2008, p.218). Adopting a qualitative narrative

approach to study women's leadership advancement in higher education offers a powerful and context-sensitive way to explore how women experience, interpret, and navigate their journeys into and through academic leadership roles. The approach is particularly well-suited for centering women's voices, understanding complex identity intersections, and challenging dominant discourses that often marginalize their leadership trajectories.

A qualitative narrative approach emphasizes the personal stories and lived experiences of participants. In the context of women's leadership, this allows for a rich, contextualized understanding of how women perceive, experience, and make sense of their leadership paths, including the challenges and opportunities they encounter (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). *"Narrative inquiry allows researchers to understand human experience through stories... reflecting personal and professional landscapes"* (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20).

Traditional leadership research often marginalizes or silences women's perspectives. Narrative research prioritizes participants' voices, granting women the authority to define their own experiences and leadership identities in their own words (Riessman, 2008). This is especially important in feminist-informed research, where storytelling can serve as a form of resistance against dominant gendered discourses in academia (Chase, 2005).

Narrative inquiry aligns with feminist theory, which values subjectivity, reflexivity, and the co-construction of meaning (hooks, 2000; Ahmed, 2012). It emphasizes that knowledge is situated and that the research relationship is dialogic, rather than hierarchical. *"Storytelling is a way in which women construct identity, make sense of oppression, and imagine new futures"* (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004).

A narrative approach is ideal for exploring intersectional experiences, as it allows participants to reflect on how race, gender, class, and institutional cultures interact in shaping their

leadership journeys (Crenshaw, 1989; Bhopal & Jackson, 2013). Stories can illuminate nuances and contradictions that are often missed in quantitative or linear research models. In addition, narrative inquiry allows researchers to question prevailing assumptions about leadership—such as meritocracy, neutrality, and objectivity—and to surface alternative leadership discourses that reflect care, collaboration, and ethical engagement (Blackmore, 1999). These are often more aligned with women’s leadership styles and values.

Data analysis started with organizing field notes. In this respect field notes gathered from semi-structured recorded interviews and documentary evidence will be summarized as field notes created under operational themes in the light of (a) the transcribed notes and (b) the notes taken at the time of interviews. We will then identify issues pertinent to the aim of the research. Data (field notes) will be organized in files and coded, this will allow us to cope with a vast amount of information. In addition, themes from the field notes and information found in documents will serve as confirmatory data for analysis abstractions.

The iterative process of reading and categorizing the data will enable the research participants’ voices and messages to be heard, thereby enabling interpretation of hidden meanings and their experiences with getting into leadership positions within their context. To reduce researcher bias, NVIVO a computer-based package, will be used for coding and interpreting hidden meanings. At this stage, close attention will be paid to metaphors, words and key phrases regarding local beliefs which may impact women’s self-belief or desire to be in a leadership position. Similarities and differences between categories will be examined with the aim of understanding how participants have experienced their journey into leadership within HEI. These themes will be further abstracted into domains describing cultural factors and local beliefs that influence promotion and career advancement decisions for female academics. Data management will be facilitated using NVIVO software.

Summary of findings, discussion and Conclusion

The paper was aimed at exploring motivators and barriers related to women's leadership advancement within Higher Education. Data shows the following:

Motivators for female leadership advancement

Intrinsic Motivators (Personal/Individual)

a) Desire for Influence and Change

Many women are motivated by a commitment to make a difference, improve institutions, and contribute to more inclusive and equitable leadership practices (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Their leadership aspirations often align with transformational leadership values—collaboration, ethics, and social justice.

b) Self-Actualization and Personal Growth

The pursuit of leadership is often driven by the need for personal development, achievement, and recognition. Women may seek leadership roles to test their capacities, reach professional milestones, and fulfill career ambitions (Sandberg, 2013).

c) Purpose-Driven Goals

Women frequently pursue leadership roles out of a sense of mission, particularly in fields like education, health, or community development. This value-based motivation aligns with servant leadership or values-based leadership paradigms (Greenleaf, 1977).

Social and Relational Motivators

a) Mentorship and Sponsorship

Support from mentors and sponsors is a key motivator. Women who are mentored by senior leaders—especially other women—often feel empowered and more confident in pursuing leadership roles (Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010).

b) Peer Support and Role Models

The presence of visible women in leadership roles acts as a motivating force by signaling that advancement is possible. Role models inspire ambition and reduce feelings of isolation or tokenism (Madsen, 2012).

c) Family Encouragement

Supportive partners, families, or social networks play an essential role in motivating women to take on leadership roles, especially when balancing personal and professional responsibilities (Ezzedeen, Budworth, & Baker, 2015).

Organizational and Institutional Motivators

a) Leadership Development Opportunities

Women are more likely to advance when institutions provide training, leadership programs, or targeted capacity building. These opportunities foster skill development and reinforce leadership aspirations (O'Connor, 2020).

b) Equity and Inclusion Policies

Clear organizational commitments to gender equity, diversity, and inclusion signal to women that they are welcome and supported. This includes transparent promotion criteria, family-friendly policies, and zero tolerance for harassment (Morley, 2013).

c) Institutional Recognition and Reward Systems

Being recognized for their contributions in research, teaching, administration, or community service motivates women to step into leadership. Institutions that value diverse contributions cultivate a culture of advancement for women (O'Meara et al., 2017).

4. Societal and Cultural Motivators

a) Changing Gender Norms

As societal attitudes shift toward greater acceptance of women in leadership, more women are socially encouraged and expected to aspire to leadership roles (Ridgeway, 2011). Media, public discourse, and education also shape these norms.

b) Global Women's Empowerment Movements

International initiatives and movements like UN Women's HeForShe, #MeToo, and SDG 5 (Gender Equality) create momentum and collective motivation for women's leadership at all levels (UN Women, 2020).

Barriers to Women's Leadership Advancement in Higher Education in Zambia

Patriarchal Institutional Culture

Zambian higher education institutions, like many globally, operate within a patriarchal socio-cultural context that upholds male-dominated norms of leadership. Leadership styles associated with masculinity—such as assertiveness and individualism—are more accepted, while women who lead with collaboration or empathy may be perceived as weak or incompetent (Blackmore, 1999; Morley, 2013).

Studies show that many Zambian universities lack a deliberate strategy to challenge the male-dominated academic culture, resulting in gender imbalance in senior academic and administrative roles (Chabaya et al., 2009).

Gender Bias and Stereotyping

Women in Zambia face entrenched gender stereotypes that associate leadership with men and support roles with women. These biases affect: (i) Recruitment and promotion decisions; (ii) Leadership evaluation and (iii) Women's self-perception of leadership potential.

Women are often subjected to a “double bind”—criticized for being either too assertive or too soft (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004).

Limited Access to Leadership Development Opportunities

There are few structured leadership development programs targeting women in Zambian higher education. Where training exists, it is often gender-neutral and fails to address the specific needs, socialization patterns, and constraints experienced by women (O'Connor, 2020; Morley, 2013).

Work-Life Conflict and Cultural Expectations

The dual burden of professional and domestic responsibilities remains a significant barrier. Cultural expectations in Zambia often position women as primary caregivers, creating time and mobility constraints that can limit their pursuit of leadership roles (Etta, 2017).

This is compounded by the lack of institutional support, such as flexible work arrangements or on-campus childcare services, making it harder for women to compete equally with men for senior positions.

Absence of Mentorship and Role Models

There are few senior women leaders in Zambian universities, which creates a vacuum of visible role models for aspiring women leaders. The lack of mentorship and sponsorship means that women often miss out on: (i) Informal networking opportunities; (ii) Insider

knowledge about career advancement and (iii) Strategic guidance from experienced leaders (Ibarra et al., 2010).

Policy Gaps and Weak Institutional Commitment

Although Zambia has gender policies at the national level (e.g., the Gender Equity and Equality Act, 2015), their implementation in higher education remains weak. Universities may have gender policies on paper but lack: (i) Gender focal units with authority, (ii) Monitoring mechanisms and (iii) Leadership buy-in for change (Sichone, 2021). This results in symbolic compliance rather than meaningful transformation (Ahmed, 2012).

Intersectionality and Exclusion

Beyond gender alone, rural women, women with disabilities, and women from marginalized ethnic or economic backgrounds face compounded disadvantages. Intersectionality is rarely addressed in institutional equity frameworks, leaving these women doubly marginalized (Crenshaw, 1989; Bhopal & Jackson, 2013).

Conclusion

Application of the feminist theoretical lens helped in identifying motivators and barriers to women's leadership advancement in HE institutions. The barriers to women's leadership advancement in Zambia's higher education sector are systemic, cultural, and institutional. Addressing them requires:

- Transforming patriarchal norms.
- Enforcing gender equity policies.
- Establishing targeted leadership development and mentorship programs.

- Creating an enabling environment for work-life balance.
- Elevating intersectional approaches to equity.

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