Understanding the Underrepresentation of Women in Higher Learning Institutions in Rwanda

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Abstract

Women can take leadership positions in higher learning institutions in Rwanda as they have

proved their potential in political positions by occupying more than 60% of parliamentary seats.

Contrary to expectation, this is not the case in higher education, where women are

underrepresented. Women in leadership were interviewed to get their lived experiences. This

study was to find out why women are underrepresented in senior leadership positions in higher

education in Rwanda and how to elevate that number of women. A qualitative research method was used. This was a bounded case study with semi-structured interviews of three women from two districts who are in middle or senior leadership positions and one who qualified but did not occupy any position of leadership in higher education. They were purposively selected for interviews as they had characteristics needed for the study. Complexity Leadership Theory was adopted which provides the conditions that allow adaptive dynamics to form and generate creative and adaptive knowledge with high importance and bring effective change. The results of this research will be important to different stakeholders such as the scholars, policymakers, and higher education managers. It was found out that culture plays a role in limiting women where some men still think women are to remain home and take care of children. Lack of adequate qualifications for these positions also emerged as women do not leave Rwanda to go for PhD studies which are preferred for those positions.

Keywords: Women leadership, higher learning institutions, underrepresentation, culture, qualification, leadership positions.

Understanding the Underrepresentation of Women in Higher Learning Institutions in Rwanda

Women's participation in the top strata of leadership in most organizations remains scarce globally. This is especially conspicuous among higher learning institutions, where the representation of women in senior leadership positions is scanty in Rwandan universities and colleges. In Rwanda, there are more women in political positions and other positions where decisions are made, but it is hard to see and document how many women are in colleges and universities (National Institute of Statistics Rwanda, 2022)

Studies show that there is a gap in leadership positions in higher learning institutions and universities in America (American Council on Education, 2012). In the workplace, there is no doubt that women have made a remarkable advancement toward gender equality as they represent 46% of the labour force (International Labor Organization, 2017). However, in corporate leadership roles, women have not made the same advancements. Even though women are qualified for the senior positions of higher education in Rwanda, they are still less represented in top leadership positions in higher learning institutions (Litt, 2020).

Statistics of women vice-chancellors around the world show that in selected countries, Hong Kong is at the bottom by not having a single woman as vice chancellor, followed by Kuwait (2%), Japan (2.3%), India (3%), and Turkey (7%). The figures from the European Union also show that only 13% of vice-chancellor positions are occupied by women, whereas in the UK, studies show that 14% of their vice-chancellors are female (Morley, 2013)

In Rwanda, there is a high representation of women in decision-making positions, especially in political positions, as the thematic report shows (National Institute of Statistics Rwanda, 2022). This is contrary to the representation of women in higher learning institution as they constitute 24.5% of the staff of higher education as per the statistics on Higher Education Council website in Rwanda (Higher Education Council, 2022). This study investigates the status of women in leadership positions in higher education institutions in Rwanda.

Women in Leadership Positions in Higher Learning Institutions

Globally, women are underrepresented in academic and administrative leadership roles in higher education institutions (Alsubh et al., 2018). A study carried out in twenty-seven countries in the European Union showed that in the United Kingdom, 16.5% of full-time university professors were women, whereas in Australia, women represented 19% of full-time professors.

About 27% of all full professors and associate professors in Australian universities were women (White, 2001).

In Chinese higher education, women are also underrepresented in senior leadership. Higher education has a low proportion of female leaders in senior management positions (4.5%). Each institution had one or two female leaders, and some universities had none. Women only occupied deputy positions rather than university leaders (Zhao & Jones, 2017). Most of the top management jobs in Chinese higher education are dominated by male leadership.

Research in the Middle East and North African countries revealed that women only occupied 3.2% of overall senior management positions (Patel & Buiting, 2019). Women are still less represented in leadership positions in Saudi Arabia's higher learning institutions than men, despite the gender segregation policies that give more opportunities for women in leadership. While there are many students enrolled in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia, only 4% of college and university leaders are female (Alshehri et al., 2018). Morley (2013) looked at the number of female vice chancellors around the world. According to research, women held 18% and 15% of vice chancellor positions in Australia and Malaysia, respectively.

In South Africa, studies show that there is remarkable gender inequality in higher education institutions, especially in senior management positions (Shober, 2014). Majority of women occupy low-level positions, while senior leadership positions are mostly occupied by men. In Zimbabwe, higher learning institutions also suffer from an underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions (Shava & Chasokela, 2021).There are not equal numbers of men and women in positions of power. Even though women make up most of the University of Zimbabwe's staff, there are not enough of them in top management positions.

As far as Rwanda is concerned, after the 1994 genocide against Tutsi, women in Rwanda were given opportunities to study and participate in decision-making positions. Since that time, the number of women in leadership positions has continued to increase. Rwanda has the highest proportion of women in decision-making positions with 61.3% of female members in parliament and is ranked in 9th position globally (World Economic Forum, 2019). In Africa, it was ranked in the first position.

Reasons for the Underrepresentation of Women in Leadership Positions in Higher Education

Previous empirical literature shows that there are various reasons for the underrepresentation of women in higher learning institutions. For example, the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in higher learning institutions was also explained by the low rate of female enrolment in higher education who are the ones that would qualify to be leaders in higher education (World Economic Forum, 2019).

A study in United States of America by Cook and Glass (2013) found that reasons for the underrepresentation of women in top leadership positions in higher education were social and cultural factors, stereotyping, family responsibilities, gender discrimination in promotion, being work-overloaded, and male-dominated networks and masculine leadership in higher education have also influenced homosocial networks. The author also claimed that the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions in higher education was due to the organizational culture of male-dominated senior management positions, exclusive networks among male colleagues, and power politics. Because of this, men and women had different opportunities in higher education, and most women worked in lower positions.

Zhao and Jones (2017) found that in Chinese higher education, it was difficult for women to obtain leadership positions due to the institutional culture of male dominance in senior management positions as well as networks of exclusion among male colleagues. Consequently, gender imbalances in leadership positions in Chinese universities were at a very critical level.

Lack of ambition or confidence to occupy and apply for top management positions is also a hindrance to women's accessing leadership positions in higher learning institutions (Zhao & Jones, 2017). Most female academic staff could not apply for senior management positions without motivation and encouragement from others. Moreover, the recruitment processes that allow both external and internal candidates to apply for senior management positions in higher education institutions prevent women from occupying top management positions. Findings show that only 34% of vice chancellors appointed via external competition were internal candidates. Women's fewer mobile careers, as well as other duties and responsibilities at home, limit their career advancement and occupation of top academic positions (Zhao & Jones, 2017).

Individual factors include stereotype qualities, being overlooked by male leaders, not having several successful women leaders to encourage them. Some women are discouraged by the conflicts that develop when they aspire for leadership positions to compete with men and are considered to have male hormones which is not a good description of a women in African culture (Cheung, 2021; Yousaf & Schmiede, 2017)

Another reason is the conservation of culture of some universities and women's fear of taking risks, as management positions require risk-takers as in early Rwandan culture, women were always looked at a weak sex where they could not inherit land, be heads of the family even when the husband dies, not own her own bank account, and could not take high leadership positions. All these constraints limit women to take on leadership roles as they are attributed to

men who are taken to be risk takers (Burnet & Rwanda Initiative for Sustainable Development, 2003). Also, women are not more likely than men to apply for jobs in upper management because of the influence of Rwandan culture that considers women as housewives who should be home taking care of the house and children. Generally, women who try to take office roles are still held responsible for a household, rushing home from work to prepare meals for the family (Tusiime et al., 2017b) .

As far as Rwanda is concerned, access to universities is influenced by different factors that affect female and male students in different ways. Such factors included gender stereotypes, family responsibilities, the presence of gender-based counselling at colleges, loss of parents/guardians, early parenthood, combining work and studies, as well as financial constraints. The lack of Masters and PhD programs in higher learning institutions in Rwanda to train more students is also a reason associated with the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in higher learning institutions (Reilly, 2021).

The Obstacles to Women's Advancement in Leadership Positions in Higher Education

Many studies have been carried out on the challenges that women face as they advance in leadership positions in higher learning institutions. Women are discouraged by the structure, expectations, and rewards characteristic of male-dominated organizations. In some organizations, women are unsafe, and the working environment is not supportive (Tamale, 2000).

Thomas and Ehrkamp (2013) claimed that women's organizational practices, cultural assumptions, interaction patterns, and organizational structure could hinder women from advancing in senior leadership positions due to the barriers senior leadership positions face, including: intensive examination in leadership, poor understanding of the role played by gender

in organizations, societal generalizations, and cultural constraints on women's own choices which restrict them on how they can contribute.

Also, sexual harassment, harassment at work, unequal standards, women not supporting other women, the gender wage gap, a lack of confidence in women, lack of mentoring and sponsorship, unfair treatment, exclusion from information networks, being put in high-risk roles, and other bad behaviour that can intimidate or provoke women, are barriers to women's advancement (Tamale, 2000).

Tusiime et al. (2017) pointed out that a lack of development and mentorship programs for leadership are obstacles to women's advancement in top leadership positions. Moreover, job responsibilities and gender bias in decision-making and hiring decisions are also hindrances to women's advancement in senior leadership positions in higher learning institutions. They further explained that women who seek to hold leadership positions face countless obstacles to achieving their higher-level responsibilities and continuing to participate in those responsibilities. These barriers are caused by a mismatch between emotional gender stereotypes and expectations of leaders and their leadership behaviours (Tamale, 2000).

According to Cook and Glass (2018), women are sometimes appointed to higher leadership positions when organizations face crises. The authors also argued that during the period of a few crises, men are selected to hold leadership positions, and when organizations begin to struggle financially, women tend to be selected to occupy leadership positions. The reason for this is that problem-solving requires leadership skills that are often thought of as being more common in women, like the ability to work with others and other human skills (Cook & Glass, 2018).

Women's Education

As the country rebuilds itself after the genocide that happened almost thirty years ago, the education sector has also undergone reconstruction within higher education. There is a great improvement in Rwanda as girls are now allowed to go to school, which was not the case in the past as they had to do home chores and take care of family members (Tamale, 2000).

In Rwanda, women and girls are now given equal opportunities to attend school, including higher education, where some scholarships are also granted to first-year students irrespective of gender (Nock & Dusenge, 2012). However, fewer women are in Ph.D. programs, which are still limited in Rwanda, and there is a mindset that women should not move to countries where they can study because they have to take care of their families (National Institute of Statistics Rwanda, 2022).

The Ministry of Education in Rwanda also saw how women were being left out in terms of education and so put a policy in place to facilitate girl child education where it starts from primary school. The policy emphasizes that both boys and girls have equal rights to go to school at primary and secondary levels. This calls for research to find out why fewer women than men still go to higher education, even though they have the same chances and the same right to education (Learn et al., 2014).

The government of Rwanda, in its Vision 2030, sets out ambitious plans to create a growing knowledge economy based on a skilled workforce that can compete in the region and the wider international arena. It is strongly highlighted that only a highly skilled workforce will operate in an increasingly sophisticated environment and allow Rwanda to become the competitive and diversified economy that it aspires to be, which is for both men and women. This requires people who are ready to learn these skills at a high quality. So, Rwanda has put

more effort into training and educating its citizens to produce enough skilled and knowledgeable people for Rwanda.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Leadership Theories

Leadership is a team building, coaching, and guiding approach that creates the environment for successful participation of group members towards organizational objectives. The leader must be able to guide, support, nurture, and facilitate the process. The leader facilitates the shaping of core group of skills and capacities that help make the process effective (Moradi & Shahbazi, 2016).

The study by Moradi and Shahbazi utilized leadership theories that are both inclusive and gendered, and that fuse well with African feminism. Recent leadership styles are cognizant of present-day realities where society is witnessing women trickling into positions of power as heads of state and government unlike at the turn of the 20th century when theories of leadership reflected prevailing social constructions of leadership that were associated with traditional masculinity, hierarchical relationships, and leveraging of power, as posited by Lumby (2015).

Critical and Emancipation Theory

The critical theory was developed by Burrel and Morgan in 1979. This theory focuses on emancipation of humans for societal change. The theory was chosen because higher learning institutions are social institutions where both males and females have some responsibilities and roles to accomplish. Emancipation values are considered as crucial in society where power of authority, control and opportunity are unequal among people. This theory is suitable for this paper as one of the aims of our study is to critically analyse the challenges facing women to advance to higher leadership positions in higher learning institutions in Rwanda (Nkomo &

Ngambi, 2009). Furthermore, women should also know the obstacles that prevent the progress to senior leadership positions and be the first ones to look for solutions to those obstacles and be role models at their workplace.

Methodology

Research Design

A research design is defined as a blueprint for collecting, measuring, and analyzing information in such a way that is consistent with the purpose of the research (Creswell, 1998). The study adopted a descriptive research design and interviews were used to collect qualitative data. The method was used to successfully collect data regarding women leadership in higher learning institutions. Interviews were found flexible and suitable for collecting qualitative data. Interviews help to provide the space for follow-up questions based on comments and perceptions and help to enhance interaction with respondents which would provide meaningful answers (Johnson, 2017).

A case study of four women was adopted for this study. They were interviewed to collect data through conversational communication and open-ended questions. A case study was chosen because it allowed the researcher to look at each person's experience through a constructive line and be able to learn of some of the reasons why women are underrepresented in higher education in Rwanda (Yin, 2014).

Creswell (1998) provided constructive ideas that allow for the collection of visible themes based on the personal experience of the participants. Using a high-quality research approach, in-depth explanations of the documents provided through the investigation of the story shed light on the life experiences of women who have reached senior levels of leadership.

Therefore, qualitative research approach was the best way to answer research questions about women's representation in higher learning institutions.

For the purpose of this qualitative research, a narrative analysis was used. Qualitative research experts urge researchers to focus on five factors when preparing qualitative research (Hollweck, 2016). These elements include explaining the research problem, identifying the purpose of the research, linking the information to the research problem or research purpose, and the criteria for interpreting the findings. The most likely question in the research was "how" or "why", according to Hollweck (2016). The aim of our study was to assess the representation of women in leadership positions. Various studies have shown that bias against women and discrimination against women is one of the reasons why women are not well represented in higher education institutions and colleges (Jackson, 2009).

In this study, semi-structured interviews were used to gather information regarding women's leadership in higher learning institutions in three higher learning institutions in Kicukiro and Gasabo districts, Kigali city in Rwanda. These higher learning institutions were considered because they are in one province, and this facilitated data collection process.

Sample size

Purposive sampling method was used to sample four women. Two women leaders were in private universities, one in a public university and the other one had qualifications but not holding any position in leadership of her university. Participants were from higher learning institutions in Kicukiro and Gasabo districts, Kigali city in Rwanda. This location was chosen because the conditions of leaders in the city are closely related and differ from rural areas.

Ethical Assurance

Participants were sent written informed consent forms prior to the interview. This protocol enabled participants to make an informed decision about their participation in the study voluntarily and confirmed their clear understanding of the study's purpose, potential risks, and confidentiality terms.

Interview protocol

Three data collection methods were utilized by the researcher by firstly collecting and recording extensive field notes, describing the interview environment and other essential information. Secondly, all interviews were conducted at the individuals' places of employment. These interviews were recorded digitally, transcribed, and submitted to participants for verification. Thirdly, observation was utilized during the meeting sessions. This gave the researcher a clear picture of how they were treated and considered at their workplace. While the interviews followed the pattern of the questions as they were originally formulated, in nearly every instance, interview was less of a question-and-answer session and more of a conversation, covering topics of interest to the interviewees and their expertise that they wished to share. In numerous instances, the researcher asked questions to better comprehend the experiences of participants. Participants showed openness even though delicate themes were being discussed, which is rare in Rwanda due to the genocide against Tutsi in 1994 and how societal trust has been lost to some extent.

Document Analysis

Triangulation was used to guarantee the data's validity. The researcher triangulated the study using different ways; what the participants shared in the interviews was compared to the researcher's observations of the participants' personalities throughout their leadership positions. In order to identify the relevance and consistency in the data collected, data was subjected to

cleaning and coding. Data for analysis was made of document notes, transcribed materials, and notes from the recording. Data analysis involves the process of verification, display, data reduction and conclusion drawing. Gill (2014) suggested four major steps to be used to analyse the narrative collected data. These are; conducting analytical interpretation, bringing themes together from all the case studies, connecting the themes through clustering, and careful reading of the transcripts for emerging themes.

Presentation of Findings

Through extensive reading of different documents, analysing, and interviews conducted with three women that are leaders in higher education and one who qualifies but is not in leadership, a coherent picture emerged. During interviews, these women answered questions freely and honestly which helped the researcher to have themes developed. The one who was qualified but not in any position thought the world is unfair as she thought it is not about who is qualified but determined by the employer's attitude towards women. Below are the themes that emerged:

Culture

Culture emerged evidently that contributes to underrepresentation on women in higher education in that most higher learning institutions believe that a woman has many responsibilities at home and so cannot lead in higher education. Men were not supposed even to share a meal with women. Women deal with home matters and men think for the country. One of the participants said, "I cannot sit on the same table for a meal with my father-in-law. It is against my culture as it would mean disrespect". Participants brought it clearer that their male counterparts in leadership positions say that women cannot manage to lead men basing on Rwandan culture. When Participant 1 was sharing her experiences, she said that she was once a

head of department and some male lecturers wanted to assume her responsibilities because she is a woman which caused conflict and finally, she lost her position to a man.

Qualifications

It is a requirement for all leaders in higher education to have at least a master's degree. All leaders are expected to have a rank of at least an assistant lecturer as they have to offer some courses in undergraduate classes before qualifying for top positions in universities. In Rwanda, the number of women with a master's degree is still low. This can be traced back to the genocide against the Tutsi where most women were left widows and so had to take care of their family members instead of pursuing higher studies.

Policies

The government has played a positive role by putting in place policies to include women in leadership and ministry. For example, in the new law, women are supposed to have 30% representation of the executive organ (vice chancellor and the deputy vice chancellors). However, these guidelines are not being implemented (Members of the Executive Organ, 2021).

Enrolment

The number of female students being enrolled in graduate studies is still low compared to their male counterparts. Women struggle to finish graduate degrees, and few go for post graduate studies as shown by National Institute of Rwanda which accounts for few women graduates (National Institute of Statistics Rwanda, 2022)

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, women should be allowed to take positions of leadership in higher learning institutions of Rwanda. Appointment in positions of leadership should be based on ability and qualifications as opposed to being based on gender. There are new trends of leadership where

people are invited to consider changes that have happened and move with current trends of leadership.

Policies that enhance equality in gender representation should be implemented in higher education for a balanced leadership since the new law requires 30% of women in executive organ (vice chancellor and deputy vice chancellors) of the universities (Members of the Executive Organ, 2021). Women should be encouraged to enrol in graduate schools and apply for scholarships for higher educational studies to qualify for leadership positions in higher education in Rwanda. Women should be encouraged to be confident and apply for advertised positions of leadership in higher education of Rwanda, thus competing with men qualified for the positions.

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