

An Exploration of Gender Bias: Issues in Female Political Leadership: The African Experience

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ABSTRACT

For Decades now, political leadership has favoured males to the disadvantage of females. The issue is beyond gender bias but has tended to breed more problems in the political, economic and the social sectors. Political instability has been so pronounced in most countries of the world, and economic recession is highly recorded, especially in the African countries. Starvation, disease, deaths are the headlines of communication media. It is obvious that the world needs a revolution, not a violent one but the reverse of a combination of leaders of nations in terms of males/females. Women are patient, have capacity to manage, ability to lead, the strength to tolerate situations and dedication for any duties undertaken. This paper has highlighted problems that emanate from gender bias which lead to political instability and incessant war among nations. Solutions have also been proffered.

INTRODUCTION

World views or perspective are changing as regards political leadership. Germany for many decades, has been governed by men but the year 2005 brought a female, Angela Merkel who assume the position of a chancellor for Germany. Comments on her political leadership shows that she has been able to form a coalition government of the Social Democrats and Christian Democrats. Johnosn-Sirleaf, a Harvard trained economist, was sworn into the

office of the president of Liberia on January 16, 2006. History reveals that her past life had been plagued with male domination, which had resulted in her being jailed in addition to all other insults meted on her. Few years ago, Philippines and Indonesia were saddled by female political leaders. Philippine is still enjoying female political leadership. Apart from the terrorist activities in Indonesia, the country had gone through relatively quiet governance.

It is observed that the world is comfortable with one combination of governance, that is, more males and very insignificant number of females at any particular period of governance. The ratio has been 2 percent for females and 80 percent for males at any particular period in world history. Life is full of probability and it would be a wide range of experience if a reverse is practiced.

The world needs a revolution, not a violent one, but one that demands that every body is equal and is capable of doing the same jobs. It is a reality that the resources of any nation are scarce and it is only the ability to manage these resources that can save a nation from a deplorable economic situation. It is a concerned issue when poverty alleviation programmes are discussed. If the root of poverty is not destroyed, whatever programmes initiated will be in vain. Economic growth in a nation is one aspect of development to alleviate poverty but the most important aspect is the way and manner of utilizing the proceeds of the nation.

It is obvious that if the wealth created by economic growth is invested wisely in education, create more employment opportunities, invest in health services, and other necessary social amenities, poverty could be reduced significantly. It is often observed that as soon as leaders, either at the Federal, state or local levels are sworn into office, the next move is their investment in foreign banks. Instead of investing the country's money by establishing and maintaining industries, they keep the money wasted in foreign banks. This unappreciable action continues to impoverish the poor countries and on the other hand, continue to make the richer nations richer. Women can help Africa, vis-à-vis, Nigeria, if women are considered as people who can perform equally as the men.

One can rightly argue that leaders of poor nations sometimes have their interest uppermost before the interest of the nation as a whole. It is shameful that poor nations continue to feel inferior to western countries, since they (poor countries) are wholly and solely

dependent on them, (rich nations). If poor countries utilize effectively their resources, the issue of foreign debt will be greatly reduced.

THEORETICAL FRAME WORK

Based on review, Stogdill concluded that leadership traits tended to differentiate leaders from average followers. These leadership traits are highlighted: (1) Intelligence (2) Dominance, (3) Self-confidence, (4) Level of energy and activity, and (5) task – relevant knowledge (Heenan, 1995). Twentieth century studies revealed that leaders were born, not created but series of researches seem to disagree with this assertion. The leadership traits debate was concluded by Robert Lord (Kreitner and Kinicki, 1998) and his associates in 1986 meta-analysis. Based on earlier studies of Man and other subsequent studies, Lord was able to obtain his findings that leadership prototypes “affects ones perceptions of “who is” and “who is not” an effective leader (Kreitner and Kinicki, 1998). Although leadership can be assumed by both males and females, someone’s leadership prototype is a mental representation of the traits and behaviours that we believe leaders possess. A popular research carried out on leadership traits came with the following questions: “What values (personal traits or characteristic) do you look for and admire in your superiors?” This question was administered to more than 20,000 respondents all over the world. Responses showed four important traits – honesty, forward looking, inspiring, and competence (Kouzes and Posner, 1995). The researchers arrived at the conclusion – the four traits constitute a leaders’ credibility. Women and men communicate differently since the dawn of time. It is often believed by some schools of thought that these differences in modes of communication do often create communication problems. Tingley (1994) identified in their survey, five common communication problems, these were:

- Men were too authoritarian;
- Men did not take women seriously;
- Men did not accept women as co-workers; or bosses;
- Women were too emotional and
- Women did not speak up enough.

As much as women’s weaknesses are being highlighted as communication problems, such weaknesses also turn out to be their

strength. Women's emotions tend to make them better humanitarians and women's weakness in speaking out tends to avoid conflicting condition which has for many centuries led to global war. Some authors believe that gender-based differences in communication are partly caused by linguistic styles commonly used by men and women. Linguistic styles include a person's characteristic speaking pattern such as directness, or indirectness, pacing, word choice and use of such elements as jokes, figure of speech, stories, questions, and apologies (Harvard Business Review, September – October 1995).

A moral imperative that emerge repeatedly in interviews with women is an injunction to care, a responsibility to discern and alleviate the "real and recognizable trouble" of this world. For men, the moral imperative appears rather as an injunction to respect the rights of others and thus to protect from interference, the rights to life and self-fulfillment. Women's concentration on care is seen as self-critical rather than self-actualization or self-protective. Gilligan, (1981) is of the view that for women, the integration of rights and responsibilities take place through an understanding of the psychological logic of relationship. This understanding, they say, tampers the self-destructive potential of a self-critical morality by asserting the need of all persons for care. For men, they agree, recognition through experience of the need for more active responsibility in taking care corrects the potential indifference of a morality of non-interference and turns attention from the logic to the consequences of choice.

GENDER AND LEADERSHIP

The increase in the number of females in political leadership has generated interest of researchers in finding out and getting to understand the similarities and differences in male and female leaders. Issues at stake consist of whether male and female leaders:

- Assume varying leadership roles within work groups;
- Use different leadership styles;
- Are relatively more or less effective; in leadership roles and
- Whether there are situational differences that produce gender differences in leadership effectiveness. Three meta – analyses were conducted to summarize research pertaining to these issues.

Eagly and Karau (1992) report on research results, which showed that the first meta – analysis demonstrated that men and women differed in the type of leadership roles they assumed within work groups. Men were seen as displaying more overall leadership and task leadership. Results from the second meta – analysis revealed that leadership styles varied by gender. It was found out that men used less democratic or participative styles than do women. That men employed a more autocratic and directive style than do women (Eagly, Karau and Johnson, 1992).

CAUSE OF COMMUNICATION DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

There are two schools of thought agreeing on cause of communication differences between men and women. The debate between “nature” and “nurture”. Research findings show that interpersonal differences between women and men are attributed to inherited biological differences between the sexes. This perspective is known “evolutionary psychology”, or Darwinian perspective. This perspective attributes gender difference in communication to drives, conflicts when viewed in respect to reproductive strategies of either sex, and needs. Taken in a more generalized manner. One is safe to argue that men, while communicating, do this in a more aggressive manner than women do. It could equally be argued in a more convincing manner that men control their feelings or emotions than women do owing to the desire for them to compete with other men.

Contrary to this view, social role theory is based on the idea that females and men learn ways of speaking as children growing up. Researches conducted come up with results that while boys learn skills and habits that focus on hierarchies and status, girls, learn habits and skills that relate with rapport and relationships, as a result of these relationships, women view communication as a network of connections in which conversations are negotiations and closeness (Kreitner and Kinicki, 1998). As a result of this happening and orientation, women are believed to give confirmation and support than do men. Since men’s view of conversation is a means of achieving upper hand in power, they try to protect themselves from being robbed of their aspired goals.

Tannen, D (1990) and Reardon K (1995) are of the opinions that men’s conversation perspective increases a male’s need to maintain independence and avoid failure.

Horner (Kreitner and Kinicki, 1998) identified in her study of women ("fear failure"). Hornes reports that "when success is likely or possible, if it turns other wise, "young women become thwarted". In her concluding observation she said that women have negative view especially against men when it gets to competitive achievement activity. It is difficult to accept in its totality, that women have negative views about competitive situations. Women are optimistic in competitions in the area of economic activities but less interested in the area of politics. The problem often lies where men disallow women to compete.

Sassen (1980) deviated from her view by saying that women are often optimistic when it gets to pursuing an activity. This is a practical situation because women do not regard competitive activity especially politics as "a do or die affair". Chodoro (1978) is of the opinion that men's social orientation is positional while women's is personal. Virginia (1929) opines that the values of women differ very often from the values of the other "sex". Piaget (1932) (1968) (1970) observed that boys in their games are more concerned with rules while girls are more concerned with relationships.

Table 1. COMMUNICATION DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WOMEN AND MEN

<i>LINGUISTIC</i>		
CHARACTERISTIC	MEN	WOMEN
Boasting and taking credit	Greater use of "I" statement, (eg. "I can do this and I did that"), more likely to boast about their achievements.	Greater use of "we" (eg. "we can do this" and "we did that"), less likely to boast about their achievements.
Having absolute confidence	Do not display their uncertainty about what they intend to achieve.	More likely to indicate a lack of uncertainty about an issue.
Getting information	Are ashamed to ask for clarifications.	More likely to indicate a lack of uncertainty about an issue.
Mode and names of communication/conversation	Do not make apologies because it makes them inferior.	More frequently say, I am sorry.
Criticism/praise	Stingy with praise.	Says I am sorry more frequently.

Adapted from Source: Kreitner and kinicki 1998

A general observation on table 1 is that women are more likely to share credit for success, to ask questions for clarifications, to give feedback in a tactful manner, and do indirectly tell others what to do while men, on the other hand, are less likely to ask questions for fear of exposing their ignorance, more likely to boast, more likely to directly give feedback and less likely to give credit.

The issues identified, on table 1 are taken from a research that was conducted by a researcher which shows that some men are more likely to boast about their achievement than do women. On the other hand, some women are less boastful of their achievements than do men. However, there are few exceptions to these observations.

The point to be noted here is that individual linguistic style influences perceptions about their confidence, competence and authority. It is believed that these judgments, could, in turn, affect their future job assignment and subsequent promotability.

AFRICAN WOMEN AND THEIR CAPABILITIES TO LEAD

Equality in all areas is needed for effective development of a nation. A nation is blessed with both male and female human resources, which are instruments for the development of any society. For a nation to refuse to tap the resources of one half is not only unfortunate but deplorable. Many Africa women are performing outstandingly. Some of the women leaders in the public sector have been discussed in this paper.

Josephine Ouedraogo recently in Accra, was honoured with the Women of Substance Award by the Acting General-Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. Her recognition was an act of acknowledgement of her relentless effort towards the empowerment of African women. Mrs Ouedraogo is a gender and development specialist, has been a Minister of Social Affairs between 1983 and 1987 under the regime of the dynamic military leader of Burkina Faso, Thomas Sankara. It is remembered that under the chairmanship of Ouedraogo, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)/Africa Center for Gender and Development aided many governments in the implementation of gender equality policies which arose from Beijing Conference of 1985. Mrs Ouedraogo has also taken office as Director-General responsible for international co-operation in the ministry of Foreign Affairs. Mrs Ouedraogo in an interview with correspondent once said;

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Women can help Africa if we consider them as people who can perform. Women have capacity, women have dedication, women have strength. And if you give the same chance to a girl, as to a boy, I think the girl will contribute immensely. But ignoring women is like ignoring 50 percent of your resources capacity. (The Guardian, Sunday, January 1, 2006)

Iyabode Veronica Anisulowo, the chairman, senate committee on state and local government Affairs is also the representative of Ogun State Senatorial District. She is a 1973 graduate of physics and mathematics from the University of Lagos. She was formerly, the Minister of State for Education. She believes in consultative politics. When interviewed on her view of the widowhood practices she said:

You see in some cultures, the widows are taken care of. In some other cultures, they are not taken care of. They are always accused of killing their husbands and then the crux of the matter is in the inheritance. ... those of us who are women know the problems of women and we want to address them one after the other. (ThisDay, November 17, 2005).

Mrs. Akerele the former Deputy Governor of Lagos State is a member of the Alliance for Democracy (AD), she had said once in an interview correspondence that “No man wants to invest in a woman politician”. The reason is not far-fetched – women never win powerful positions except men are prepared to put them there. She had made a very important statement reaction to a question on how she views a female president for Nigeria. She said:

Well, I have been expecting an honest, selfless and corrupt free government because I think women are less corrupt than a man (The Guardian, Monday, September 19, 2005).

In Nigeria is a woman of reputable Character and Integrity. An estimated 8, 864 sanctions has been carried out for 3 years. These sanctions involve companies and individuals in the country ranging from arrests to closures for violation of existing regulatory laws between 2002 and 2004. This has been the highest recorded closures and arrests since the creation of NAFDAC. This simply means that a women occupying that position ceases to look at money to the detriment of the lives of Nigerians. Akunyili joined forces with more than 500 black women influential leaders from Africa, the Carribean, Central and South America to form a strong inter-continental union for promoting greater understanding, support and collaboration among black women all over the world. In her presentation in a five-day Global summit of Black women leaders with the theme, "Africa meets the Americans" held in Houston City, she presented a paper entitled "Fake Drugs: A Global threat worth fighting for". She also regretted that the prevalence of fake and counterfeit drugs in Africa has worsened the existing burden of debt, poverty, illiteracy, disease and war.

Sirleaf's Victory is unique in the sense that in Africa, being a patriarchal, society, it has been difficult for a woman to lead any African Nation. Leadership of the nations has been the preserve of the menfolk while women are assigned secondary roles. It is not true that women folks refuse to contest for the position of a president, but the fact remains that women are never given the opportunity of emerging as a presidential candidate. Mrs. Sarah Jubril of Nigeria and Mrs. Winnie Mandela of South Africa had failed to attain the position of a leader of a Nation but Sirleaf had succeeded. This is a clear indication that women are interested in political leadership. Sirleaf is Havard Trained financial expert. She was sworn into the office of a leader of Nation on January 16, 2006.

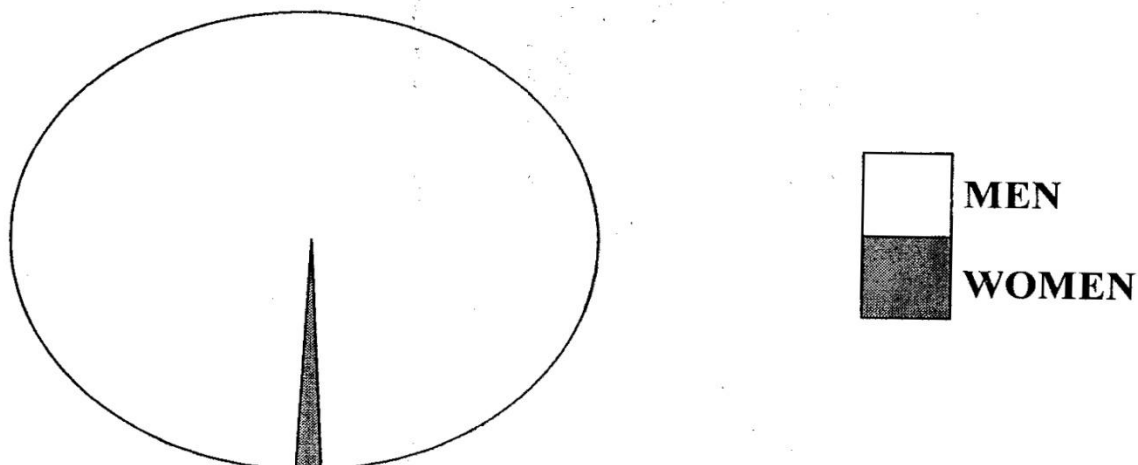


FIG. 1: A Graphic Representation in Percentage of 53 African Leaders of Nations in Terms of Males/Females

Fig. 1 shows that out of 53 Independent African Nations, only one woman is a leader of nation, that is, the President of Liberia Ellen Johnson – Sirleaf.

WOMEN AND THEIR PECULIAR LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS

- **WOMEN ARE JUDICIOUS HOME MANAGERS:**

Very few women can stick to a policy of feeding very well at home. Majority of homes will have mothers who cope with moderate feeding but few men can cope with such “not too good feeding”. Experience is the best teacher, it is often said, therefore, if women have been able to manage the lean resources at home, then they can manage the lean resources of a nation. Umoh, in her Ph. D. Thesis discusses the peculiar characteristic of women in home management which is a clear case that they could better manage a government.

- **WOMEN ARE TACTFUL IN THEIR DAILY EXPERIENCES**

Relationships are maintained if diplomacy and tact are employed in daily relationships. Men often think about their power relations and position while women think about interpersonal relationships first. If relationships are maintained first, there will be less conflict and, therefore, less war. Mrs Megawatti, the former Indonesian President used her tactful diplomacy in handling the terrorist organization in Indonesia, unlike President Bush's action in Iraq.

- **WOMEN ARE PATIENT AND TOLERANT**

To bring up children at home gives women extra ability to tolerate and be patient. In a family, different children exhibit different characteristics and success can only be achieved through tolerance. World conflicts emanate as a result of impatience and non-tolerance. An example cited is the Iraq war where President W. Bush refused to allow the UN inspectors to complete the weapon inspector's job. He plunged U.S into war. Even though the war was declared ended within a period of two months, the suicide bombing attacks and other insurgency activities continue to exist owing to his non-tolerance attitude. Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, when she assumed the political leadership in Germany, was expected to withdraw German troops in Iraq immediately she took over the mantle of leadership. Instead, with her patience and tolerance she is using a peaceful means to achieve slowly her aim. She has avoided open confrontation with the U. S President over the Iraq war, and this shows clearly women's patience and tolerance.

- **FORESIGHT**

Women's foresight is guided by the principle of the consequences of decisions. A woman takes cognizance of the consequences of her decisions. In disciplining a child, the consequences of such decisions are weighed. The effect of the discipline on the child, on the other children, on the parents, on the household and on the entire environments. Women have had series of experiences in decision making and have, as a result of such consequences been familiar with critical situations that need tact and foresight.

CONCLUSION

This work has highlighted the fact that the female political leaders total 2 percent globally while men enjoy 80%. The number is insignificant enough to cause a global concern for the discrimination of women in political leadership especially in Africa. Africa leadership forum recommended in the year 2000, a 30 percent representation of women in political leadership. The highest percentage is 5 percent of women in political leadership in any of the African countries. It is safe to conclude that African leaders believe that men are better leaders than do women.

RECOMMENDATION

- Africa needs a revolution, not a violent one; the kind of revolution that accepts everybody – man or woman.
- Africa should come up with leaders that are able to invest in education, create more employment, and use money generated judiciously.
- Women can help build Africa if Africans consider them capable of leading. Some women are highly educated, in various skills, the ability to perform, the dedication to duty, tactful initiative, patience, foresight and persistency.
- Communication between sexes should be improved. Women and men should lead to gender flex. Gender flex entails the temporary use of communication behaviours typical of the other gender in order to increase the potential for influence.
- Either 50 percent female and 50 percent male governance or 80 percent female and 2 percent male governance is recommended.

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