



Impact of Women in Leadership on Community Development and Economic Growth

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ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates the significant leadership position of women regarding their effects on economic development and social progress specifically, in African regions. Women leaders use transformational and inclusive leadership concepts to promote sustainable development by activating collective community involvement and economic growth. Empirical evidence shows that female leaders invest in equitable policies sustainable practices and grassroots outreach since they tackle their singular challenges, such as cultural resistance organizational indifference and familial duties. The research article establishes that there exists a vital missing component in knowledge about women's leadership roles within African communities. The approach presents interventions that affect women on individual, organizational and policy scales to strengthen their leadership capacity and community-driven economic growth. The research demonstrates the critical role that women's empowerment in leadership plays in attaining multiple development objectives alongside inclusive development targets.

Keywords: Women Leadership; Community Development; Economic Growth; Gender Equality; Inclusive Leadership; Transformational Leadership; Sustainable Development; Africa; Women Empowerment; Policy Interventions

1. INTRODUCTION

Women in leadership roles have positively impacted society and many groups throughout history and in all nations, particularly Africa. In their diverse fields, including public administration, pharmacy, medicine, and others, certain women have paved the way and are still thriving today. Due to globalization, different viewpoints are now present in discussions of development. Gender and governance are at the forefront of major modern development discourses (Damilola, 2018).

Against this backdrop, this research aims to analyze the role of women in leadership as far as community and economic advancement are concerned, focusing on the African regions. The paper will discuss how women at the community level occupy leadership positions to support sustainable development and close the socioeconomic gaps. Furthermore, the essay will look at the women's struggles in their daily lives. Lastly, the discussion will include potential solutions to enhance female leadership at individual, organizational, and policy levels to promote and advance their contributions.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership theories such as transformational leadership and inclusive leadership provide a framework for understanding the impacts of females in the community. Ahmed Khan et al. (2016) state that transformative leaders increase their followers' morale and motivation. According to the theory, transformational leaders "engage in conversations with people based on similar values, beliefs, and goals." This affects the performance that results in achieving the objective, which is pertinent to those in authority who want to inspire others to support sustainable development projects. Female leaders, particularly in Africa, often adopt transformational approaches prioritizing collective well-being and fostering trust, making them effective change agents (Brown et al., 2019). Meta-analytic studies confirmed its effectiveness (Hoch et al., 2018) and showed that women display more transformational leadership than men.

Inclusive leadership theory also provides insights into the unique strengths of female leaders, as it is a response to a leader's daily tasks, including assembling different teams, managing crises, adjusting to change, and dealing with injustices and demands. (Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2022). According to Leroy et al. (2021), inclusive leadership focuses on behaviors that create a sense of inclusion and encourage employees to be themselves because they are unique and different. This leadership style differs from first-level diversity interventions emphasizing gender-related aspects, such as focusing on a broader diversity range (Leroy et al., 2022). Organizations headed by females promote participation, particularly women and youths, and feature community participation in decision-making that encompasses a broader social interest (Meng & Neill, 2021). These leadership approaches are consistent with sustainable development objectives since they entail commitment and cultural aspects.

2.1 Gender and Leadership

Gender and sex differences are treated interchangeably, and gender is assumed to be a fixed individual characteristic rather than a socially produced structure (Kark & Buengeler, 2024). This leads to different gender stereotypes and attributions that render women less capable. Accordingly, to succeed in organizations and achieve leadership positions, women must adapt to and demonstrate the required traits and skills (Kark et al., 2023; Zheng et al., 2018a, 2018b). According to Gray et al. (2019), women exhibit leadership traits, including empathy and compassion, but these limitations limit their chances in fiercely competitive commercial settings. Related research explores whether there exist any gender differences in organizational contexts and which conditions evoke these differences and alter their outcomes. This approach resonates with the conceptualization of and research on the traditional leadership theories developed before and during this first wave of feminist theories.

Moreover, female CEOs are most effective in dealing with scarcity and possible risks and selecting tasks that help the needy groups. Han and Noland (2020) explained that feminine leadership improves a corporation's profits and performance by increasing gender diversity and organizational quality. For example, Jane Agnes Machira, a female member of the Kenyan National Parliament, valued sustainable conflict resolution strategies, funded student bursaries, established a womentable-banking and investments forum, supplied boreholes to support domestic and agricultural operations, and fought against the evil of illegal brews that harm and kill Kenyan consumers (African Union, 2022). On the same note, female leaders uphold positive attributes like equity and sustainability, bearing on the African community's social challenges.

2.2 Existing Research on Women's Leadership Impact

Existing research highlights the positive impact of female leadership on social and economic progress. For instance, for every 10% increase in tenure-weighted female directors, there was a corresponding 7% rise in patents and a 6% increase in citations (Chen et al., 2018). Glass et al. (2016) contributes to the body of research on governance and sustainability practices by showing how the proportion of women in senior positions affects corporate practices. Jun et al. (2020) state that women leaders significantly improve patents and trademarks and benefit innovation. This indicates that women in the workforce are more likely to be financially involved in innovation. According to a 2021 study by the African Development Bank (AfDB), women reinvest most of their earnings in their families' health, education, and food. Therefore, their full socio-economic engagement has a positive impact on development. Sustainable development is inextricably related to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls (AfDB, 2021).

According to Gabrielli et al. (2019), since grassroots women's actions to promote local growth and wellness align with the international Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5, which seeks to empower all women and girls and achieve gender equality, they have a solid connection to sustainable development. By addressing these goals at the community level, women leaders contribute to national development efforts and promote inclusive and equitable policies. An example is Kebbeh Monger, President of Liberia's National Rural Women Structure, a grassroots group that significantly improved people's lives in many communities by creating offices, promoting adult literacy, climate-smart farming, and developing entrepreneurial capabilities (UN Women, 2021). Nevertheless, there are still some limitations in the literature on women entrepreneurship and research on their challenges and the sustainability of their endeavors in African areas (Shinbrot et al., 2019).

2.3 Research Gap

Although the impact of women in leadership has been a popular topic of discussion in most literature, there is a lack of research that studies women's roles in leadership at the grassroots level, specifically in African regions. In particular, more studies should be conducted to analyze how women break structural gender segregation and which interventions allow maintaining women's leadership positions.

Knowing these dynamics is essential for establishing gender policies that may boost women's contribution to community development and designing interventions that combat social and economic problems in communities (Parejo & Radulović, 2023).

3. ROLE OF WOMEN LEADERS IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Community members organize and interact as part of the social action process known as community development. According to Ekong (2013), community development is the process through which individual citizens' efforts are combined with the governments to enhance the economic, social, and cultural factors of the communities, include them in the country's life, and allow them to participate in its advancement fully. Therefore, women leaders at the grassroots level tend to prioritize social needs such as health, education, and poverty. It is a common practice for women leaders to focus on the population's needs, the most sensitive categories of children, women, and the elderly, to improve the population's quality of life. For example, in their study, Javadi et al. (2016) explore how health leaders, primarily women, promote social justice in their practice. One of the African leaders raised concerns about political advancement training and consciousness-raising programs for women, which mobilize dormant potential and give women the spirit to fight for social and economic change. This approach assists women in comprehending political and social systems and bringing change in those areas.

Moreover, existing women leaders right from the grassroots level also support gender equity and peace, eliminating cultural practices that inhibit the chances of women and girls. Poltera (2019) highlighted Pinky Lalthapersad-Pillay in his study for addressing maternal mortality in Africa. She profiles women leaders like Joyce Banda and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who, as presidents of Malawi and Liberia, respectively, confronted urgent

health issues, including maternal mortality. This entailed coming up with policies and or programs on women's health and fetal mortality in a bid to liberate women in those countries in a natural way via health.

4. ECONOMIC IMPACT OF FEMALE LEADERSHIP

Female leaders in community settings support economic development by encouraging local businesses, especially among women. Many market skills and products that empower women-owned businesses, many of which generate social and economic returns through local reinvestment. Studies have shown that women-led enterprises' transformative impact and ability to reinvest in home incomes and national economies are crucial (Hewitt, 2024). She also stated that women-owned enterprises ensure everyone benefits by lowering poverty, fostering innovation, creating jobs, and making communities safer, greener, and livelier (Hewitt, 2024). These women-led businesses are regenerative forces that create business networks and employ locals. Thus, without them, local economies cannot thrive.

The advancement of women's economic empowerment is consistent with more general objectives for economic development, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially those about economic growth, fair employment, and gender equality. In order to contribute to the equitable progress of the nation, women's economic empowerment would increase the number of women in the workforce, according to Kumari (2020). According to Kumari (2020), women who have economic empowerment can enjoy well-being and contribute to economic growth, productivity, poverty reduction, and efficiency improvements. Thus, women's empowerment encourages a community's sustainable growth (Sen, 2019).

5. CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN LEADERS IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

One of the most significant challenges female leaders face in community development is cultural and societal barriers. Because of patriarchal institutions and established gender equality relations, several African nations have unequal relationships with power that restrict the number of women in local government decision-making roles (Amponsah & Boateng, 2021). According to Boateng (2017), there are evident connections between gender roles and sociocultural practices that are related to the historical heritage of patriarchal agents and forces like marriage, family, religion, social norms, and values. For example, in Nigeria, widowhood customs, restrictive religious practices (found in the northern geopolitical zone), and the purdah system (found in the northern part of the country) are examples of sociocultural practices that hinder women's empowerment and equal rights, thereby increasing the burden on these women (Okere et al., 2024). These socio-culturally imposed limitations are to blame for low levels of engagement in policy and decision-making processes.

Another challenge is the lack of support. Female leaders do not receive enough governmental support since men frequently control the existing political networks and structures, which can hinder their initiatives (Saluja & Minz, 2023). Women's goals in politics are constrained, and their professional advancement is hampered by the lack of role models and mentors who can offer support and assistance (Saluja & Minz, 2023). Without support and guidance from more experienced leaders, women may struggle to build the networks and skills they need to succeed in leadership roles (Naqbi, 2023).

Furthermore, a major difficulty that affects the performance of women leaders is the social responsibilities of an individual and caring for their family. It was found that women are typically supposed to be executives in many facets of their lives, including work, family, and house-help (Appelbaum et al., 2019). This may prove challenging for them and hence cause a dent in their leadership prowess. Females in leadership often struggle to balance work and family responsibilities, leading to burnout and stress, reducing their effectiveness in community development projects (Naqbi, 2023). Women are still expected to shoulder most domestic duties and childcare responsibilities, which can interfere with their ability to focus on their careers, limiting their time to commit to community projects. For example, IndraNooyi, former CEO of PepsiCo, has spoken publicly about balancing work and family challenges, stating that she would often skip school events for her children to attend business meetings (Naqbi, 2023).

6. PROPOSED SOLUTIONS TO SUPPORT WOMEN LEADERS IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The proposed solution will be divided into three levels respectively

6.1 Individual-Level Solutions: Empowering Women Leaders

Community and sponsorship remain equally crucial for the female population, which does not have a chance to get a remarkable promotion without external assistance. Another critical factor is supporters because they are also part of developing female leadership. For example, these networks can be structural, random, and other women in similar leadership positions. This makes it easier to build women's confidence and leadership skills while managing the challenges of community-based work (Naqbi, 2023). They offer a safe space for women to share their experiences, receive support and advice, and develop relationships that can help them advance their roles.

Additionally, skill development workshops can mobilize leadership, management of project resources, and championing, enable women leaders to handle social injustices, and improve project performance. In this way, further steps must be taken to build a diverse, truthful, and well-paid future for women in leadership (Naqbi, 2023).

6.2 Organizational-Level Solutions: Supporting Women's Initiatives within Communities

Building community-based networks for female leaders provides a rich platform for shared support, ideas, and collaboration. These networks help provide forums for women in these positions to share ideas, strategies, and good practices to help them improve their leadership challenges. According to Appiah (2015), governments have recognized the importance of women in local governance. They have been implementing affirmative action policies to include them. One of these tactics can be creating networks for them. In his study, Harry (2024) noted that creating networks and mentorship programs for women in politics can give them the tools and assistance they need to thrive in their careers.

Furthermore, increased funding and resource allocation for female-led projects is another potential solution to the organizational level of supporting women leaders in community development. Organizations, non-governmental organizations, and community groups can eliminate funding discrimination by ensuring that they fund more programs. It is always recommended that donors and sponsors provide special funds for women leaders since they require financial support for their projects. Among the tactics based on community action is the availability of valuable assets such as property, money, and innovation, which can help female leaders expand the reach of their projects and overcome the barriers posed by limited resources (Okere et al., 2024).

6.3 Policy-Level Solutions: Creating an Enabling Environment

By implementing gender-sensitive policies that promote women's involvement in decision-making, governments can assist women in achieving their leadership objectives. Klaa and Buheji (2020) assert that all government programs and the private sector in African nations must acknowledge the contribution of women to economic development and life by establishing legal frameworks, promoting gender equality locally, and ending the marginalization that African women endure. Such policies improve women's representation and address gender prejudice by altering standard assumptions over time. Also, Klaa and Buheji (2020) suggested in their study that competitive programs in Africa guarantee gender mainstreaming in important policy domains such as commerce, investing, employment, skills, business, and economies impacted by conflict.

Additionally, public campaigns that focus on explaining the value of women in leadership positions and equality can assist with altering the thoughts and sentiments of society. To alter the culture and reduce gender prejudices, these efforts could make people aware of the importance of gender diversity and the potential of women leaders (Harry, 2024). Additionally, it acknowledges the presence of senior women politicians while calling for relevant media to be balanced and favorable to their leadership in governing their countries to enhance the development goals headed by women.

7. CONCLUSION

How women affected the leadership within the community and Africa's economic growth is empowering. Women in leadership have shown they can deliver on these aspects of society: transformation, good governance, and innovation for economically sustainable development. Women, individually and collectively, are effectively participating in governance at the local level through NGOs in poverty eradication, education, health, and other sectors. They adapt to the region firsthand and serve the purpose directly in the societies. Nevertheless, this shows that women leaders face many societal, resource, political, and family challenges, which must be addressed separately. The solutions recommended in this research should help deal with such barriers at the individual, organizational, and policy levels to enhance the support of female leaders.

Suppose any growth is sustainable and progressive enough to empower as many women as possible. We must know that leadership barriers to women are systemic and must be combatted to their roots. Therefore, governments, organizations, and communities must acknowledge women's rights and enable these women to take a central role in decision-making and social projects.

Therefore, this essay aims to show that women's leadership is important in changing communities and the economy. When actualized, the recommended solutions should foster the creation of strong and effective female leaders while at the same time creating a progressive and sustainable development of African communities' future.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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