

Chapter Four

African Women and Leadership Issues: Problems and Prospects

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Introduction

Women in leadership positions face a lot of challenges, within and outside these positions. Naturally, a lot of trials come their way as women, even without them being leaders. As influential individuals within organisational settings, women face problems of access to leadership positions; they confront the need to be promoted, the need to negotiate some positions as wives, mothers and other categories of women and even battle cultural, geographical, monetary and other limiting factors.

When we look at the Nigerian state, the entrance of women into leadership positions did not begin after political independence. Many women were leaders in pre-colonial times. They occupied these leadership positions alongside men. Despite this evidence there are fewer women than men in contemporary elected or appointed leadership positions.

When women are leaders, they enjoy little or no clout and are often required to defer to men, with only few exceptions. The United Nations has been in the forefront of canvassing visibility for women. Between 1975 and 1985, and from then to 1999, there have been declarations of strategies, decades and

conventions that support women. From the year 2000 to the present, the millennium declaration puts in the vanguard goals that address women's issues and seek to actualise them.

Leadership, as it relates to women, takes different stances. By this, one means that women can wield leadership at home, at work, in religious, secular or traditional spheres, and even in areas fusing some or all of these scopes. However, my purpose in this chapter is to discuss leadership bearing in mind women's experiences in the public sphere and the challenges they face. Where there are prospects, these shall be discussed. To this end, I shall discuss leadership before I venture into other segments of this chapter.

Leadership

Leadership has assumed different explanations, definitions and conceptualisations. It is common to see women occupy leadership positions in every walk of life. These are not limited to formal employment, but also involve informal situations. When women are leaders, certain factors come into play, such as the organisational climate, whether policies are inclusive or exclusive of women, gender politics and certain cultural factors. Richard Pettinger (1997: 33-34) argues that "leadership is concerned with getting results through people, and all that entails and implies—the organisation of the staff into productive teams, groups, departments; the creation of human structures; their motivation and direction; the resolution of conflicts at the workplace...".

Julia Indvik (2001) in her seminal treatise, "Women and Leadership", discusses studies that reveal that women possess leadership qualities and abilities but are often not well represented in these positions. Women have, through educational empowerment, prepared themselves for proficiency or univer-

sity education in different disciplines; these women can hold their own. These professional or sometimes unskilled women could be as competent as the men they work with, but their career progress is slow due to several social, cultural, spousal, economic and geographical factors. Patriarchy in Nigeria is often implicated.

Gerald Cole (2004: 53) attempts a description of the various kinds of leaders, from the charismatic, the traditional and situational, to the appointed, functional and principle-centred leader. In this treatise on the theory and practice of management, he defines leadership at a place of work as: "a dynamic process whereby one individual in a group is not only responsible for the group results, but actively seeks the collaboration and commitment of all the group members in achieving group goals in a particular context and against the background of a particular national culture".

Cole (2004: 53) moves from this work-related definition, which he tied to the exigencies of national context, to declare that "there is no best way of leading—leadership is essentially about striking the right balance." To explain his position further, he asserts that this balance is "between the needs of people, task and goals in a given situation". This means that leadership is not facile, but crucial to national development and progress. Perhaps this may have informed Anthony D'Souza (1989: 23) to make the claim that "leadership carries a heavy burden of responsibility". Apart from Cole (2004) and D'Souza (1989), Gary Yukl (2006: 21) discusses the general assumption people have about leadership as having links to corporate empire building. To him, "leadership connotes images of powerful, dynamic individuals who command various armies, direct corporate empires". From general perspectives, he moves on to nine broad definitions of leadership. With these definitions spanning 1957

to 1999, Gary Yukl (2006: 23) relates the differing and sometimes elusive postures evident in the scholarship and practice of leadership. These nine definitions are listed below:

1. To Hemphill and Coons (1957), “[leadership] is the behaviour of an individual...directing the activities of a group towards a shared goal”.
2. To Katz and Kahn (1978), “the influential increment over and above mechanical compliance with the routine directives of the organisation” is leadership.
3. Leadership to Burns (1978) “is exercised when persons... mobilize... institutional, political, psychological and other resources so as to arouse, engage and satisfy the motives of followers”.
4. Rauch and Behling (1984) consider leadership to be a “process of an organised group toward achievement”.
5. Jacobs and Jacques (1990) claim it is “a process of giving purpose (meaningful direction) to collective effort, and causing willing efforts to be expended to achieve purpose”.
6. To H.H. Stein (1992), leadership is “the ability to step outside the culture... to start evolutionary change processes that are more adaptive”.
7. Drath and Pallus (1994) regard it as the “process of making sense of what people are doing together so that people will understand and be committed”.
8. Richards and Engle (1996) are of the opinion that “leadership is about articulating visions, embodying values and creating the environment within which things can be accomplished”.
9. To House and others (1999), leadership is “the ability of an individual to influence, motivate and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the or-

ganisation”.

After these definitions of leadership, which open up the concept as an individual and group-based factor, Yukl agrees that differences exist between theories, scholars and practitioners on the degree of overlap between management and leadership. Rosemary Stewart (1999: 56) sees leadership as guidance and presentation of the way to followers. To her, a lot of people have a preference for the word ‘leader’ to the word ‘manager’. However, Afsaneh Nahavandi (2000: 13-14) notes competence as an important factor of distinction between leadership and management. To her, “much of the distinction between management and leadership seems to come from the assumption that the title of leader assumes competence. Therefore, an effective and successful manager can be considered to be a leader, but a less competent manager is not a leader”.

The line separating leadership and management is slim. Regarding the variance, John Naylor (1999: 523) sees leadership as social, internal, within the leader, a phenomenon and not a position; while management is environmental, based on the manager’s position.

What can suffice for now, so we do not derail from our focus, is to consider the variance between the two concepts mainly in the areas of the means, channels and processes involved in the two concepts and the achieved goal or realised result. Yukl (2006: 27), however, provides a working definition of leadership, thus: “Leadership is the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how it can be done effectively, and the processes of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish the shared objectives.

He notes that leadership can be collective, joint or legislated, or even spread. The position of Yukl (2006) tallies with that

of Nahavandi (2000) who sees leadership as consisting of a triad: a group phenomenon, goal direction and a formal or informal hierarchy, which can be rigid or flexible.

Women and Leadership

Focusing on women and leadership, we see certain stereotypes. Women are sometimes considered excellent leaders, but only when they lead in informal settings like religious groups, markets and homes. This stereotype fuels the erroneous belief that women lack the skill and emotional strength to cope with the often stressful demands in formal organisations. Gender bias also comes into play when women and men leaders are assessed side-by-side. The stance of Nina Colwill (1995: 32) on this is that “men’s styles are seen to be more competitive, controlling, unemotional, analytical and hierarchical; women’s styles tend to be presented as more collaborative and cooperative”.

The paucity of women in these leadership positions may account for the greater number of men making leadership exclusive to a greater number of their fellow men than women. More so, the arrival of large numbers of women on the leadership scene is often seen as a later manifestation. If, in the opinion of Bob Johnson (1999: 3-4), leadership means having a sense of worth in the organisation through inspiring and motivating people, making them feel good about themselves, their work and the organisation, encouraging their participation and involvement and helping them to grow and develop, women can be considered leaders from what they accomplish in all spheres of endeavour.

Domestic factors also shape the stereotype of women as leaders. Women are considered to be caregivers at home; childhood socialisation factors prevent them assuming leadership roles early enough.

Challenges Women Face in Leadership

Every leadership position occupied by women has its challenges and difficulties as well as its prospects. How well a female leader leads depends on the coping strategies she is able to map out on her own, or along with other colleagues, be they male or female. The major challenges women face are as follows: trying to be men in their styles of leading subordinates; the challenge of the conflict between the home and the workplace; spousal control and interference (Brief et al, 1981). One may have to consider the problem of sacrificing the woman's ambition due to family pressures or demands. With a strong focus and purpose, several women reach their destinations. When women limit themselves and have low self-esteem they get nowhere on the corporate ladder.

Arising from the factors mentioned above is the dilemma of mentoring. Who does a female leader mentor? Does she focus on a female or male protégé? What chances are open to her leadership when the cliché, 'women are their own worst enemies', rules the organisation? How does the female leader address the risks involved in leadership, decision making and appreciating the achievements of fellow women, be they lower on the corporate ladder or fellow leaders? These queries offer some insight into what women face as leaders in contemporary times.

Women leaders are often accused of absenteeism because they fall ill and need medical care and attention, they give birth and have to proceed on maternity leave; they suffer domestic violence, have family commitments and often request leave of absence to meet these commitments. As a result of these, the dominant opinion is that they lack the skill and competence to lead because they allow these obligations to eat into their work life. Also, women's promotion does not come when due. When the woman retires, her work continues and she hardly has time

