



**UNIVERSITIES, THE RAMIFICATIONS OF  
SCIENCE SYSTEMS AND WOMEN'S  
LEADERSHIP OF HIGHER EDUCATION  
INSTITUTIONS IN AFRICA – CASE STUDY OF THE  
UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI**

**Contextual Paper**

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## **Abstract**

This paper provides a case study of women leadership pathways at the University of Nairobi, Kenya. The paper seeks to provide contextual analysis of leadership structures at higher education institutions and draw the much-needed attention to the lack of gender diversity in leadership positions, more so senior management. The subject of women leadership, both in academia and administrative positions has been under explored, in terms of their agency, development and successes.

Therefore, this paper aims to provide insights into the practices and processes that shape women in leadership by delving into the various themes, the first theme provides historical context on the state, gender, and leadership dynamics, this provides an overall context of Kenya, and the role of women in various leadership positions since independence. The second section delves into University of Nairobi and provides a historical context of the University and existing leadership structures, and lastly the third section examines existing national policies on gender inclusivity and equality in the leadership space.

**Keywords:** *Kenya, higher education, women leadership, university leadership, gender, gender mainstreaming, University of Nairobi, academia, organizational culture, policies*

## Overview

This research by the Institute for Development Studies (IDS), University of Nairobi, and the African Leadership Center (ALC) Nairobi explores the gendered inequality in the leadership of higher education institutions in African countries. The research investigates how the **gendered dynamics of leadership structures** and **leadership development processes** shape the prospect of women's leadership of higher education institutions in Africa and seeks to answer three broad research questions.

- 1) How is the underpinning **logic of leadership and leadership development** in higher education systems in Africa gendered?
- 2) **What needs to change in the logic, structures, and leadership development processes** in higher education institutions to ensure equal leadership opportunities for women in science systems in Africa?
- 3) **What channels of influence** exist for leader emergence outside of the formal or recognized leadership progression pathways, which privilege women and men alike?

These questions are explored with a focus on women leadership at the University of Nairobi (UoN). The research is qualitative and aims to understand, among other aspects, the historical dimensions of contemporary leadership structures and processes, and the interrogation of the broader societal context of leadership 'meaning-making' and practices at the UoN.

## The Approach

This paper is a contextual background of the university of Nairobi case study. It is largely qualitative and based on review of secondary sources of information that include the archives, books, journal articles and research reports, book chapters, and the university of Nairobi publications such as the administrative and academic policies, and relevant national policy documents from the Ministry of Education.

This paper focuses on the historical, political, socio-cultural elements that have shaped women leadership at the University of Nairobi (UoN), and to understand the evolution of UoN's leadership structures and practices. The reviewed documents include archival material from the national archives and the UoN historical documents. The former female leaders at the UoN, the periods of change and drivers of such change have also been mapped out; and the official and unofficial sources and channels of influence in the leadership of the UoN identified.

This background (country context) paper includes: -

1. The role of history which includes: -
  - Different sectors including politics/governance and the gender and leadership dynamics.
  - National policies on education (leadership) and access to these positions
  - Existing Progression unions- do they reflect women's issues or even fight for these?
  
2. Background on the Universities of Nairobi in terms of: -
  - The founding of the university of Nairobi
  - The governance statues such as the UoN Charter
  - Policies documents such as the affirmative statutes
  - A gender analysis of faculties, positions and gender diversity, decision making assemblies (the senate) and their composition.
  - Progression systems/policies for promotion

## Introduction

Higher education institutions serve as a microcosm of the society. For Kenya, it reflects a society still struggling with issues of gender inequality, rooted partially in traditional customs, exacerbated by the colonial regime influence, and retained in the post-independence state. Though universities claim to uphold intellectual and institutional cultures rooted in gender neutrality, they still fall short. Achieving gender equity at institutions of higher education holds the potential to bring on board diversified perspectives and inclusive decision-making within the sector, and the country. This paper draws attention to the evolving gender dynamics landscape within academia, by drawing from University of Nairobi. The university over the years has seen an increase in the number of women in leadership across diverse levels and cadres, as well as those pursuing advanced degrees. However, the progress in uptake of STEM courses is still low, as is the case for those entering the academia sphere, more so in senior leadership positions. This paper delves on the challenges and opportunities women face in assuming leadership positions in higher education institutions by first examining Kenya's national context, then University of Nairobi context.

## Kenya Higher Education Historical Context

In Kenya, women's leadership in higher education has been shrouded by twists and turns, with key points in time that marked progress towards women leadership and others the dethronement of the women from leadership. Leadership as described by Lonsdale 1981, is the art of translating the social values of power to achieve accepted and desired ends of a group, a community, or a country. This paper delves into this perspective and questions the outcome of a society whose leadership might be skewed towards a segment of a group, community, or a country? Marginality of women in leadership positions and in decision making, both at the political and institutional level, is a product of a history processes and for Kenya, the colonial and patriarchal processes.

Women's leadership in Kenya was shaped by socio-cultural processes that traditionally placed women in the domestic sphere. The historical processes that have shaped women leadership in Kenya and at the University of Nairobi are linked to socio-cultural and political processes and are linked to the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-independence period. During this period, the role of women was heavily based on the "Victorian" ideology. Women had specific gender roles that centred in the private domain but nonetheless elevated their position in society. These roles were informal and apolitical (Kamau, 2010). During the pre-colonial era, colonial and the post-colonial era, most women grew up in the rural villages that gave them indigenous identity and where they performed roles of wife, mother, child-bearer, caretaker and food provider (Karani, 1987). These roles, which were largely in the private domestic sphere, were taught through

traditional education which entailed ‘living by doing and observing’. A few older women performed public roles as medicine women, but nonetheless, their place was largely in the home, where they were ‘respected and protected’. Thus, traditionally, women’s role remained in the domestic space, and only a few, based on seniority penetrated the public space. In the colonial era and the struggle for independence in Kenya, women played a distinct but hidden role in supporting the freedom fighters. They supplied them with food and arms in their hideouts, acted as their spies, and took part in oathing and administered oath of secrecy (Kystaff, 2021). Women were therefore part of Kenya’s political history.

Generations of reinforcement of these ideologies, coupled by the traditional African way of life in some communities impacted the domesticity ideology which became an accepted norm in modern society for a majority, even the oppressed. House-Madiba 1990 reiterated the impact the colonial period had on the status of women in society, he opined that although African customary law in some instances viewed women as subordinates to men, in many respects the gender roles were complementary in nature, and women had spheres of autonomy and authority. Furthermore, the modern expression of these delegated gender roles and relations, since colonial period, relegated women’s contributions as neither complementary nor significant to the national development processes.

These ideologies coupled with structural mechanism in place during the colonial period impacted on women socio-economic status. In Kenya, the introduction of formal school education during the colonial era (1885 – 1963) brought about change which though slow, had far reaching effects in terms of shaping women leadership. Education was the catalyst for preparing youth for private and public roles in modern Kenya (Karani, 1987). Traditional education alone, was no longer considered adequate or relevant preparation for professional roles in the modern Kenya. Thus, whereas women continued to play their traditional roles, they required education to take up roles beyond the domestic space. Thus, the entry of women in the education space was critical in shaping their leadership pathways. However, in most cases, women were not prioritised, traditionally and culturally, in the education space. From the traditionalist thinkers, the place of women was in the domestic space, and this thinking was entrenched further in the post-independence era.

Traditionally, men in the African traditional societies, including Kenya, played a supervisory role regarding rights over land, but with the new colonial regime this role changed to individual legal ownership, which completely cut off women access and decision making on land matters (Elkins, 2005). The introduction of a monetary economy, cash crop farming and formal education also disrupted and displaced women’s gender roles. This is evident in policies that were passed during this regime such as the 1920, National Registration Amendment Ordinance which made it

compulsory for African male above the age of 15 to wear an identity document “kipande” (Karari, 2018).

The identity document as claimed by the colonial government was to serve the purpose of efficient tracking of the labour pool. It provided means for the surveillance of indentured labour and limit Africans bargaining power. The design of the identity document also created resentment from Africans as it was deemed inhumane. In addition, the document was also discriminatory towards women as they could not easily acquire it. Instead, they would carry a ‘red book’ which was filled by their household employer. For those who got the kipande it was marked with red ink to signify the domestic role of the woman. This effectively limited women’s opportunities and contribution to the formal economy and access to urban centres, most men ended up leaving their wives and children in rural areas (Kareithi, 2020). Housing in the colonial regime equally did not support a family set up, and women who moved to the city alone were looked down upon by society and deemed to be engaging in immoral activities. The culmination of decades of this regime left women at a disadvantaged position as majority lacked access to proper education, the formal economy, and other basic amenities of the modern society. This meant that women’s position was relegated to that of a “second class” citizen.

Regardless of the hurdles that hindered women’s progress and voice in society, a number still actively participated in push for self-rule and independence from the British. Their roles varied from feeding and protecting the veterans who fought against the colonial government, to leading in some communities, the struggle and protest colonial regime. They also participated in the political negotiations that led to independence. Heroes such as *Mekatilili wa Menza*, from the Giriama, fought to secure African culture that the colonial government sought to abolish. Her tactics entailed using traditional instruments such as the “kifudu” dance and traditional cultural religion to build resistance. Field Marshal Muthoni Karimi, another hero, joined the Mau Mau resistance movement at an early age and became the first and only female field marshal in a movement that sought Kenya’s independence. The contribution of women in rebellions and movements that sort independence, had for a long time been neglected in literature and academic discourses, the silence served to disregard their efforts and capacity in a post-independent state (Presley, 2014).

With the dawn of an independent nation in December 1963, colonial structures were progressively dismantled but never to the full extent, aspects such as oppression, class divide, and gender discrimination persisted. The new African government became the embodiment of masculinity and ethnicity. No female held a cabinet position in the first government, and women were viewed as being incapable of being good leaders, more so by those who occupied those positions of power. In the instances women were able to participate in this male-centric system, it was at a “co-optation” level. Even in curriculum engagement and mainstream writing women’s



contribution to state building was relegated to the background and in some instances silenced. It was not until the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that women writing began to flourish as they assumed space to create their own agency and evolve a gender inclusivist and all-encompassing human space in their writing on post-colony states. These writers included the likes of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, Prof. Micere Mugo and Margaret A. Ogola (Odiemo-Munara, 2010).

### Politics, Gender, and Leadership Dynamics

Post-independent Kenya, from the onset did not provide a platform for gendered understanding of leadership and politics. The political space from the onset was dominated by a male-ruling class that was equally unapologetically masculinist. Regarding Kenya's democracy, it has over the decades gradually morphed into one which places emphasis on the rule of law and periodic elections as the main form of acquiring power legitimacy. Servant-leadership leadership has consequently been altered whereby the people now serve the leadership. An analysis of the 20<sup>th</sup> century parliaments creates a picture of political leaders such as Martin Shikuku who vocalised women inability to conduct successful leadership roles. For instance, he likened women to children who were not capable of representing themselves, hence needed to be represented by men. The latter political eras of presidents Mwai Kibaki and Uhuru Kenyatta, while they improved the place of women in political leadership and governance, equally did little to affirm them. During these regimes, women progression in leadership positions, especially political, was slow (Kamau, 2010).

For the few women who made it to high leadership positions, both at the political and other government positions, a distinguishing feature was their stellar professional achievements, mostly their academic accomplishment. Another feature was their family background that seemingly boosted their place and aspirations for leadership. Coming from a 'high profile' family tends to dismantle the patriarchal hurdles that women face in society, hence, entry into leadership for women, such as Grace Ogot, seems to be a societal privilege and grossly an unequal adventure. This is nonetheless not the case for all women. Some like Prof. Wangari Maathai did not have the family support and valiantly struggled against numerous odds to hold her position. She however had education achievements that enhanced her education, and the personality that boosted her resilience despite the many oppressive attempts by the government of the day to silence her.

Nzomo (2003) argues that the lack of women participation in elective seats stems from a structural angle where for instance the electoral playing field has mostly been tilted in favour of men. This manifests in the form of persisting social resistance to women participation in the leadership arena, culture of electoral violence, women marginalization in mainstream political hierarchy and the lack of adequate political socialization for women leadership which then

translates to exclusion. Women who engage in politics often have to conform to societally-determined and defined gendered prescriptions, standards and political rules of maleness, , which in many cases does not align with their lived experience and visions, this additionally makes it difficult for them to effectively progress in leadership. In public discourse, the political elites often unapologetically subvert the role of women leadership and their contribution in political discourse, with undertones of ‘frivolity’ being used to silence women, thereby denying them the opportunity to become visible and to actively participate in leadership on an equal platform. Such scenarios are replicated across the higher education arena, where women are still the minority in institutions and organisational leadership.

### Nexus between University and the State

The challenges faced by women in securing spaces and representation at the electoral level is not a problem confined to the government, other sectors including higher education institutions are affected. From the onset university education in Kenya served as a conduit for the achievement the nation’s intellectual, political, and economic aspirations. Across a number of African countries that had just gained independence, similar aspirations were shared; that higher education could play a pivotal role towards nation-building, hence African governments made an effort to establish at least one national university in their country (Mosha, 1986).

For Kenya, higher education institutions, even before the post-independence state became areas of contestation as various forces sought to influence this landscape, which was key to the country’s growth trajectory. For the church, education institutions were important for their evangelic mission, while for the colonial government education was an agency for social control. With the dawn of African self-rule these same institutions became spaces that were crucial in the formation of an elite class and the mechanism through which ideologies could be controlled. In Kenya, interaction between the state and higher education institutions have varied with each successive government. In the era of the first president Jomo Kenyatta, the colonial culture was maintained as these institutions served the colonial elitist ideologies.

Whereas nationalists’ approaches were embraced to enhance provision and access to education for all, women largely remained in the rural areas, and many did not progress into education and academic, despite government initiatives to provide education opportunities for all. Thus a crash between strong traditional beliefs about the place of women were not yet broken down, and the pursuit of education. For most Kenyan communities, the women place remained in the domestic space, where they were prepared to take up wifely roles. Those who ventured outside of this contextual framing were seen as unfit for marriage, and consequently their moral ability to lead would be questioned, even when they had acquired academic prominence. For President Moi’s

regime that begun from 1978, education begun becoming more inclusive as his aspiration was to make education more accessible, and not just for the privileged few, this was continued by the successive government, under President Mwai Kibaki. Gendered leadership, however was not an issue that merited serious attention for these regimes (Kithinji, 2023).

## Historical Foundation, University of Nairobi

University of Nairobi, the second oldest institution of higher education in East Africa, can be viewed as a gateway to understanding the development of Kenya, and her people. Before becoming an independent university in 1970, the university traces its inception to 1956, when the British government opened its doors as the Royal Technical College of East Africa (University of Nairobi, 2020). The establishment of the Royal Technical College was a product of several years of lobbying from various actors with the earliest being in 1921 when Harry Thuku, one of the early Africa nationalists, together with his party, Kikuyu Central Association rallied for more access to secondary and higher education opportunities for Africans. These demands were dismissed by the colonial government on the grounds that the African taxpayers could not afford it (Kithinji, 2023).

Further support for access to education came about during the period of World War II, when the liberal wing emphasized the urgency in providing social welfare in British colonies. Consequently, this led to the establishment of the Commission on Higher Education in the Colonies, in 1943. The commission was tasked with preparing the Asquith Commission Report, 1945, which became the blueprint for the development of universities in the British colonies in Africa. In Kenya, the colonial administration support for having these education institutions locally was driven by the notion that it would reduce the number of Africans who went abroad for higher education. A move that was seen to have potentially negative consequences for the colonial regime due to their interaction with other ideologies that were misaligned with the colonial government. The British colony in Kenya, was however generally not supportive of higher education as compared to other colonies like Uganda, the colony felt that secondary education would be more than adequate for Africans. Additionally higher education would not necessarily contribute to economic growth and poverty eradication, rather the investment for provision of higher education would be a burden to the state (Uetela, 2017). However, the need to curb the uprising within the territory and internationally the institution was upgraded to a university college by the East Africa High Commission in 1961 and become the Royal College Nairobi. In partnership with University of London, the institution was now able to award degrees.

The progress made so far was also in line with the Inter-territorial University Concept for East Africa, and guided by the University of East Africa Act, 1962, the Royal College Nairobi, became the second university in the region, after Makerere University College and lastly University College of Dar es Salaam (University of Nairobi, 2020). The aim of this act was to harmonise higher education in the region, and this would be possible if there was a shared administration unit between these 3 constituent colleges. The concept of a harmonised higher education in East Africa was wrought with challenges from the onset due to issues such as financing and allocation of student slots at the university which was supposed to cater for the entire East Africa territory and all races including the Indian community (Mwiandi et al., 2010).

The East African University model of operation lasted only 3 years, as it came at a time when the 3 East African countries had just gained independence, in the case of Kenya, at the eve of independence. The different paths in terms of economic and political ideologies that the three countries took after gaining independence led to the gradual disintegration of the university of East Africa, and the formation of 3 fully fledged independent Universities; thus in 1970, University of Nairobi began operating independently, under the University of Nairobi Act, 1985 Cap. 210 Laws of Kenya (now repealed). The three universities, though operating independently, have over the years tried to build better collaboration through the guidance of the University Committee of East Africa, under the auspice of the East Africa Community (EAC).

### University of Nairobi Charter, 2013

The increase in higher education institutions, the need to ensure quality checks and to stem out the emergence of ‘questionable’ universities, and check quality standards in higher education institutions, a government policy to charter all Kenyan universities, was introduced. Hence, on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2013, the then president Mwai Kibaki, in accordance with section 19 of the Universities Act, 2012, granted University of Nairobi its charter, referred to as University of Nairobi Charter, 2013. The charter recognised the university under the newly promulgated Constitution, 2010. The University of Nairobi Charter, 2013 is categorized into five parts. The first part contains the preliminary that interprets what various title or words mean within the charter for purposes of clarity. Part 2 of the charter clearly states the establishment and function of the University. It also spells out the University’s mission, which is;

*“...to provide quality University education and training and to embody the aspirations of the Kenyan people and the global community through creation, preservation, integration, transmission and utilization of knowledge.”*

This mission is guided by the philosophy which seeks to;

*“...connect to and inspire the Kenyan Community, to provide leadership and stewardship and to give hope and faith to the Kenyan society that it can excel in whatever it chooses to do with passion, moral responsibility and a strong sense of patriotism.”*

Guided by its mission and philosophy, the university has a mandate to conduct 24 functions and objects, which range from providing higher education, which is providing technological, professional, scientific education and for research: to contributing to industrial and technological development and society in collaboration with industry and other organizations. Its other functions include promoting critical enquiry and creativity in education, training and research within the institution, fostering the general welfare of staff and students, providing opportunities for development and further training for staff of the institution and to co-operating with the Government in the planned development of University education and, in particular, examining and approving proposals for new faculties, new subjects of study submitted to it by any constituent college or other post-secondary institution among others.

The charter also clearly states that discrimination of any form at the university regarding admission or staffing is not acceptable.

*“Admission to the University as candidates for degrees, diplomas, certificates, or other awards of the University shall be open to all persons accepted as being qualified by the Senate in accordance with this Charter, without distinction of race, ethnicity, place of origin or residence or other local connections, political opinion, colour, creed, physical ability or gender; and no barrier based on any such distinction shall be imposed upon any person as a condition of his becoming, or continuing to be, a professor, lecturer, graduate or student of the University, or of their holding any office therein, nor shall any preference be given to, or advantage be withheld from any such distinction.”*

The third part of the Charter details membership and governance structure of the university, it highlights the members of the university from the leadership levels to the student and alumni. The chapter also describes the roles and responsibilities of the university management, starting from the Chancellor who is appointed by the President and hold office in accordance with the provisions of the Charter; Chairperson Council who is appointed according to the provisions of the Universities Act. The Vice chancellor who appointed in accordance with the provisions of the Act and the deputy vice-chancellors, who in consultation with the Chancellor, are appointed from among the professors at the University. The Principals of Colleges, who are appointed by the Council in consultation with the Chancellor. Other management positions include the Council which consist of nine persons appointed by the Cabinet Secretary of Education, the Senate, the

University Executive Board, the convocation, and the staff of the university. The final component in part 3 is a directive on performance of functions in the absence of an office holder.

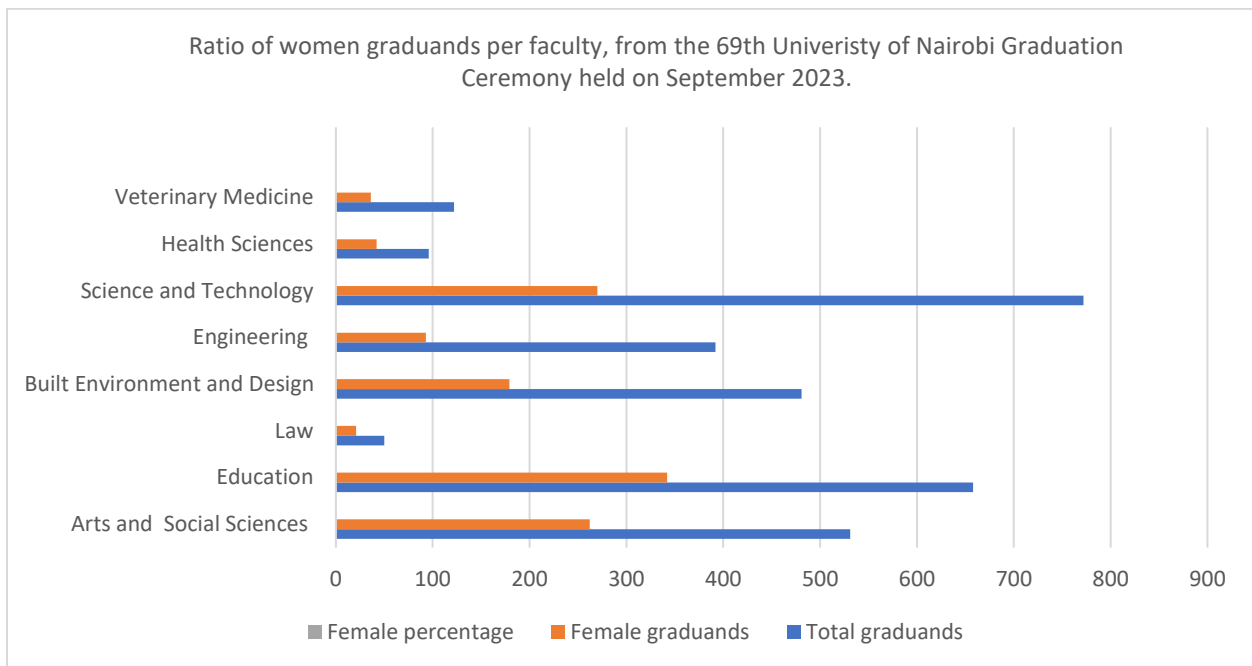
The fourth part of the charter entails the financial provision. It first states the university's fiscal year which commences on 1<sup>st</sup> July and ends on 30<sup>th</sup> June in the following year. It also stipulates actions to be undertaken regarding investment funds, annual estimates, accounts, and audit. The last part, part five is the miscellaneous provisions. It contains the directives on the use of the Common seal, making of statues in line with the charter, and repeal and savings of Chapter 210 and the transition period.

Prior to June 2021, the university offered education services, undergraduate and graduate, through several research institutions, schools and six colleges, that is the College of Education and External Studies, College of Agriculture and Veterinary Science, College of Architecture and Engineering, College of Biological and Physical Sciences, College of Health Sciences and College of Humanities and Social Science as per the University of Nairobi Charter, 2013. However, under the 8<sup>th</sup> Vice Chancellor, the university underwent re-organization of structures that existed, and colleges were abolished. The goal was to reduce duplication in administrative roles and increase efficiency in university operation, as well as improve cost efficiency. The restructuring entailed structuring all academic programs into 11 faculties, and retaining 14 research institutions that would solely focus on research and generation of knowledge in specialised areas (ARUA, 2022). Currently the university population staff stands at 2220 academic staff with PHDs, 450 Professors, the highest in the region, and 5525 administrative and technical staff (University of Nairobi, 2023).

### Women at the University of Nairobi

Historically, women access to education in East Africa was mostly restricted to primary and secondary education, with very few getting bachelor's degree. Where offered, they tended to lean towards domestic science-oriented subjects which in future meant that women were less capable of competitively engaging in the labour market and the formal economy. Women who made it to the university campuses as students, staff, or faculty had to contend with institutionalized practices such as discriminatory residential systems and the chauvinistic attitude of male students, staff, or faculty members (Mama, 2003). This translated to slow progression career wise for women who were interested in an administrative or academic position at the universities. Research on women in senior position also identified other factors that impeded women progress such as the tension between women reproductive responsibilities and professional role, organizational policies that claim to be gender neutral, the effect of market economy on women in managerial position and finally the lack of support of women leadership at the societal and institutional level (Mabokela & Mlambo, 2016).

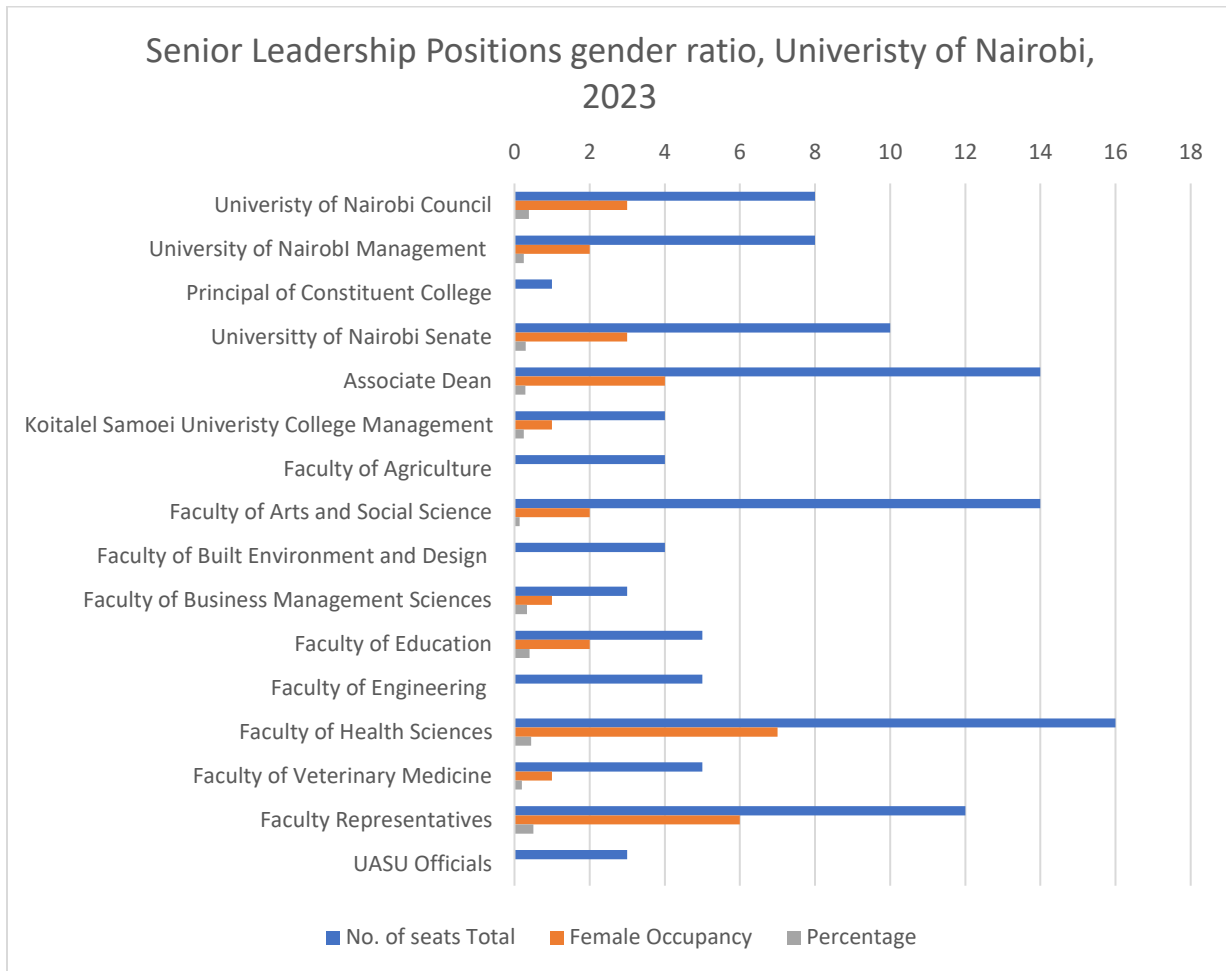
Over the decades Kenya has made progress regarding women access to education up to the university level, though the number of women engaged in STEM subjects is still low. This evident in the recent University of Nairobi 69<sup>th</sup> graduation ceremony held in September 2023, where the Faculty of Agriculture had a total of 138 female graduands out of 299 (46%), Faculty of Arts Social Sciences had 262 female graduands out of 531 (49%), Faculty of Education had 342 female graduands out of 658 (51%), Faculty of Law 21 female graduands out of 50 (42%), Faculty of Built Environment and Design had 179 female graduands out of 481 (37%). Faculty of Engineering 93 female graduands out of 392 (24%), Faculty of Science and Technology 270 female graduands out of 772 (34%), Faculty of Health Sciences 42 out of 96 (44%), and, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine 36 female graduands out of 122 (29%) (University of Nairobi, 2023a).



Source; (University of Nairobi, 2023a).

Despite the gains made in women enrolment and completion of university degrees, this has not been the case for women in leadership, power and, decision-making positions in academia, more so senior management positions. Structural, cultural, and interpersonal factors have played significant roles in the slow progression of women representation in leadership position at these institutions of Higher Education. In East and Central Africa, Prof. Wangari Maathai became the first woman to gain a doctorate degree in 1971, yet the numbers of men who had doctorate degrees were many. In 1976, she became the chair of department of veterinary anatomy and in 1977, an associate professor at the University of Nairobi. The first woman in Kenya’s Higher Education system to become a full professor was Prof. Leah Marangu, and in 1978, she was appointed as a full professor and chair of Department of Home Economic at Kenyatta University.

Decades later women representation in senior leadership is still low. Looking at the current senior management composition at the university, paints a clearer picture.



Source; (University of Nairobi, 2023a).

The table above shows the percentage of women in senior academic or administrative position as of 2023. The table shows leadership positions starting from the University Academic Staff Union (UASU) to the senior most level, the University Council. Looking at the chart the trend shows that women occupancy is below 50 % in all positions except the faculty representatives where there is a balance. Faculties such as Agriculture and Engineering lack women leaders as well as UASU, which is association that represents academic staff in the entire university.

To understand the current low rates of female occupancy in senior leadership positions at the University, it is important to go back and trace the historical trajectory of women leadership in administrative and academic roles at the university since it begun functioning as an independent university in 1970. To achieve this, the paper draws from a few stories of women who joined the university to pursue their education and opted to further pursue careers within the university



during the post-independence state. One theme that is evident is that their identity as women, and their perceived role within society, outweighed their leadership qualities. This meant that career progression was met with obstacles from the institutional level as well as at the personal level (society) (G. E. Idahosa, 2021). University of Nairobi, the 1<sup>st</sup> National University in Kenya, was also nothing short of the embodiment of institutionalized patriarchy that was dominant in the country. Women who dared to lead were often fought by their male colleagues and society, not for their lack of leadership qualities, but by the virtue of them being a woman. Some of the notable inspirational women leaders at the university were Philomena Chelagat Mutai, who joined the University just as it had become an independent university in 1970 and fell under the minority group by the virtue of her gender and ethnicity. During her studies at the university, she actively engaged in students' politics and became the 1<sup>st</sup> female editor of the student magazine "The Anvil". As the editor of the student newspaper, she used the platform to lobby for student welfare and highlighted the excesses of the university administration. In the 70's, not only were female students few, so was female leadership, female students who attended the school were characterised and expected to be passive to matters of leadership more so politics. This meant that Ms. Mutai stood apart from the university's narrative of the nature of women in academic institutions and this earned her titles such as the "tough lady." In her final year, in 1973, her role as the editor for the newspaper, became the basis of her expulsion, as she was deemed guilty of inciting student riots at the university, which led to a 2-year indefinite closure. Staff, but more so student protests and riots, which result to unscheduled university closure became a culture that the University of Nairobi, as compared to others in the country has had to contend with over the years. Gender bias in leadership was not limited to institutions, but to the wider society, this is evident in how women were depicted even in the media an example is the case of Daily Nation, a national newspaper, who in 2013 published a tribute to her. The paper described her as "The girl who fought 'men's war' at varsity against Kenyatta rule." The titles in itself speaks to how society viewed women who actively engaged in the civic space (Kweyu, 2013).

During the 2-year school closure Ms. Mutai, got awarded a scholarship to study at the Harvard University but this became impossible as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, then headed by Vice President Moi, explicitly denied issuing her a passport, this meant she was unable to travel. Having tried to have the passport matter resolved and failed, she proceeded to join politics and campaigned in her hometown Eldoret, she personally did her own campaign by visiting each homestead. In 1974, she became the first and youngest Nandi woman MP in the 3<sup>rd</sup> parliament, joining Grace Onyango the first female MP in post-independence Kenya. Her position as an MP though was short-lived as in 1976, she was jailed for inciting violence at Ziwa Farm in Eldoret, her jail sentence effectively meant that her tenure as an MP ended. After completing her sentence, she went back into politics, but in 1981, she decided to self-exile in Tanzania, as the government had started to round up and imprison people who they felt were anti-government. Though her political career was brief, the impact she had on society was felt and she became an

inspiration to women seeking leadership positions. Recently during a senate preliminary session, Senator Boni Khalwale when calling upon great women leaders referenced Ms, Chelagat Mutai as “... a great woman, she is a hero of the second liberation of this country. She was detained, she was exiled, but Chelagat Mutai, never walked on her knees...”

Prof. Micere Githae Mugo, was another hero who began her academic career at the University of Nairobi and equally faced a myriad of challenges in her career progression, both at the institutional level. Born into a society that was trying to navigate colonialism and after, living in a society that still marginalised her after gaining independence. Her career trajectory set off, under the regime of President Arap Moi, which was intolerant of views that supported multipartyism or left-wing ideologies, it was also not supportive of issues of gender equality or the plight of the poor. Her political activism and position at the university constantly landed her in trouble with the government, as she was repeatedly harassed, arrested, and tortured for organising demonstration and for her works. In 1982, after the failed coup of President Arap Moi government, her family and she were exiled, and she moved to Zimbabwe; her Kenyan citizenship was also revoked, and she only regained it in 2009. The failed coup led to the exodus of many academics’ professionals, progressive union members, political activist, and press officials, who were either exiled or due to fear of torture and oppression left the country as the government viewed them as a threat to the state’s stability. Prior to her exile, Prof. Micere gained her PhD in 1978, from the University of Toronto, Canada, during that period she also took up teaching position at the University of Nairobi from 1973. In 1980, she became the Dean of Faculty of Arts, a position in which she was the first woman to occupy in Kenya.

In regards to her life trying to navigate as an academic professional, she referenced, in what became one of her famous quotes, during her keynote address at the 57<sup>th</sup> Commission on the Status of Women Conference held by the United Nations in New York, 2013 (Syracuse University, 2013). That;

*“Writing can be a lifeline, especially when your existence has been denied, especially when you have been left on the margins, especially when your life and process of growth have been subjected to attempts at strangulation.”*

In her poem, “The Woman’s Poem” she further explores how society has silenced women, and the insidious effect of patriarchy. She calls upon women to take up their own agency and break free from patriarchy to break free from the status of a subordinate in society. In her works Prof. Mugo also celebrated women’s power through “herstory” and brought out women’s contribution to Africa’s civilisation and the role women had in building a sustainable Africa (Sackeyfio, 2023).

During her memorial that was held in at University of Nairobi, Taifa Hall in 2023, she was described by her fellow university colleagues and students, among them Prof. Ngugi wa Thiongo, who co-authored with her a play titled ‘The Trial of Dedan Kimathi’ as a self-made accomplished scholar and undistracted campaigner of social justice, whose legacy will live on. The Former Chief Justice, Willy Mutunga who served from 2016-2020, in his speech at Syracuse University in 2015, and 2023 at her memorial referenced to her as his mentor and the mother of feminist masculinity, whose work influenced his professional journey more so in human rights advocacy. He recalled her engagement on national political debates, at the University of Nairobi, Senior Common room where she called out her fellow intellectuals to re-evaluate their ideologies considering their silence when it came to matters of gender, and the growing hostilities to political dissent. She encouraged her fellow colleagues to model their social existence to be consistent with the ideologies they claimed to hold, as ultimately individuals were social actors in their personal space (Mutunga, 2023).

Ms. Chelagat Mutai and Prof. Micere Mugo stories reflect part of a picture of what other women, within the higher education system faced and continue to navigate when trying to grow careerwise. What is also evident is the nexus between the government and university, with the latter reflecting the microcosm of the existing society. Higher education institutions in Kenya have held the notion that they serve as space of neutrality, yet the reality is a stark contrast, in which sexual and gender dynamics are lived experiences of many who have attempted to occupy spaces, more so in senior leadership positions. Those who manage to attain seats in the senior leadership are still valued, evaluated and promoted differently from their male counterparts (G. Idahosa & Louise, 2014). In the case of Prof. Micere Mugo, her rise within the University was one that involved moments of accommodation, and resistance when her colleagues felt she overstepped the boundaries and gave the university unwarranted attention from the government. The reality was and, in many ways, still evident that society had normalised the ‘male’ as the embodiment of knowledge, intelligence and leadership qualities, hence, although the University of Nairobi, even in its Charter, 2013, states its stance regarding discrimination, the reality, tells a different story.

In recognition on the slow pace in achieving gender equity among its students, staff and faculty, the University of Nairobi in May 2023, established the gender mainstreaming section headed by Dr. Grace N. Kiringa, whose role entails to raise gender awareness, promote gender sensitive and inclusive environments, improve gender parity in student enrolment and performance, train trainers in gender analysis skills and lastly promote gender equality in staff recruitment, training and promotion (University of Nairobi, 2023b). It is equally important to note that achieving a gender sensitive and inclusive environment at institutions of higher education cannot occur in isolation from the wider society, hence review and an understanding of national policies and

progress made by state is important in positioning effort and policies that exist within the university that seek to achieve gender equality and inclusivity.

## National Policies on gender inclusivity and equality in leadership space

Since the post-colonial era, there have been efforts, through Kenya's education policies to enhance women access to education which in turn would increase their chances of getting into leaderships. The post-colonial nationalist movement aimed to provide education to all citizens regardless of gender, ethnicity, or social status (Urch, 2017). Consequently, the first education policy introduced in 1964, sought to provide free primary education to all children and to increase access to secondary and tertiary education (Inyega et al., 2021). However, the clash between tradition and modernity still made it difficult for girls to enrol in education, especially in communities that strongly held the traditional beliefs on the roles that women and girls were expected to play, including that of being a wife, with the resultant early marriages. The 1970s education policies attempted to address this gap by introducing affirmative action to increase the number of women in higher education through provision of scholarships for girls and women, and quotas for female students in universities (Nangulu, 2007). Later in 1981, the government launched a new policy that aimed to promote gender equality in education. The policy aimed to increase the number of female teachers and provide equal opportunities for girls and boys in primary and secondary schools (Mackatiani, et al., 2016). These policies have resulted in improvement in literacy rates and in some way increase in women participation in leadership. However, gaps still exist in women participation in higher education, particularly due to the patriarchal nature on which the universities, like the UoN, are founded.

The National Policy on Gender and Development (NPGAD), adopted in 2000 was the first national level policy that sought to legitimately address gender inequalities at all levels of government institutions and by all stakeholders. The policy highlighted the requirements for achieving gender representation and gender mainstreaming in all sectors. The goal was to align the country's sectors to achieve several commitments it had made during regional conventions and international treaties that the country had ratified such as the Declaration of the UN Women's Decade in 1975 and the United Nations Third World Conference on Women in 1985, which led to the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies. These strategies sought to promote peace, by eradicating violence against women, eliminate all forms of discrimination against women through constitutional and legal frameworks and tailoring national strategies to enable women participation in the country's development. Though the policy was adopted in 2000, and additionally backed up by Sessional Paper No.2 of 2006 on Gender Equality and Development. a decade later much had not been achieved as per the expected outcome; implementation of the set-out strategies happened at a slow pace and in a number of sectors progress was barely non-existent.

The Constitution of Kenya, 2010 provided an avenue to review the existing policy document and align it to the current legal framework that was being adopted. The policy was also due for review in line with the country's national development plan, Vision 2030 as well as the ratified

international treaties and regional legal frameworks. In summation it would incorporate new provisions from the Matrimonial Property Act, 2013, which safeguards women property rights upon marriage dissolution; Marriage Act, 2014, that grants both parties in a marriage equal status; Land Act and Land Registration Acts which secure women's rights to land; and Kenya Citizenship and Immigration Act, 2011 which provides for dual citizenship, which now enabled married women to confer citizenship to their husbands from foreign countries, something that previous was not legally possible. The policy document would additionally also consider policies that sought to address violence against women that is the Counter trafficking in Persons Act, 2010, the Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) Act, 2011; and Sexual Offence Act, 2006.

The new policy, referenced as the National Policy on Gender and Development, 2019, and themed "Towards creating a just, fair and transformed society free from gender-based discrimination in all spheres of life practices." was finalised by the State Department for Gender Affairs in the Ministry of Public Service, Youth and Gender Affairs in 2018. The document highlights 14 thematic areas and key issues that affect women in all sectors of the society, including at the personal level. In line with the scope of this paper three themes outlined are of great interest that is theme 2, that speaks to access to the labour and the economy, theme 3 which speaks to access to education and lastly theme 8, which speaks to governance, peace and decision making.

Across the 3 themes, key issues raised were macro-economic policies and sectoral policies not being gender responsive, gender inequality in the job market, as women only occupy 30% of the formal economy and the need to create a balance between social and economic roles that hinder women progression. Under access to education, institutional barriers such as weak coordination mechanism between national and county government and child labour were highlighted, cultural practices such as FGM and household headship roles more so in the absence of parents were noted as having an impact on education. The last theme, governance, peace- and decision-making places emphasis on enacting laws for realisation of the two-thirds Gender Principle in elective positions. Additionally, theme 13 and 14 that speak to The Girl Child & Boy Child and Intersectional discrimination, recognises that there are inadequate interventions to that seek to address intersectional discrimination, and women have limited access to opportunities, agency, and capacity to negotiate and move between different intersecting identities. To address these key issues, the policy sets out various approaches such as: incorporate gender mainstreaming in all planned interventions, use affirmative action to address past gender inequalities and injustices, empower all genders to facilitate equality, equity and non-discrimination, involve men in addressing gender issues, and adopt gender responsive development planning budgeting among other measures.

Getting the gender debate and agenda into decision making spaces has not been a flawless process, it has entailed lobbying and constant push by various groups from women groups, civic societies, and progression unions.

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