



**RESEARCH PROJECT ON UNIVERSITIES, THE
RAMIFICATIONS OF SCIENCE SYSTEMS AND
WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP OF SCIENCE SYSTEMS IN
AFRICA**

ANALYTICAL REPORT

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I. OVERVIEW

The research focused on how the **gendered dynamics of leadership structures** and **leadership development processes** shape the prospect of women's leadership in higher education institutions in Africa, with a specific focus on the University of Nairobi. The research addressed the core research questions as follows: -

- 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?

The focus on women leadership aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 5 and 16. Goal 05 aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Specifically, Target 5.5 is aimed at ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life. Further, Target 5c stressed the need for adoption and strengthening sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels. The SDG 16 on Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels. Target 16.7 ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels.

II. METHODOLOGY

The research used a mixed-methods approach that involved review of secondary data, getting quantitative using a survey and from the secondary sources on university staff establishment. Additional information was obtained through key informant interviews which targeted key persons who held or had previously held positions of leadership at the university. They included both female and male, had representation across various levels of leadership within the academic, research and administrative arms of the university, and across the various faculties and departments and disciplines.

This report is based on data from the qualitative interviews and where necessary is backed up with secondary data. A total of 16 interviews were conducted among seven females and nine males. They represented the different faculties and units of the university, and different levels of leadership; as well as those holding or having served in technical committees or in advisory roles, as well as in research leadership roles. The interviews focused on several issues related to university leadership, and further on female leadership. The issues studied focused on the university policy context in relation to entry and recruitment, promotion, and retention of staff (and specifically women); pathway to leadership and leadership positions held by women;

challenges that women face in ascending to different positions of leadership in the university, and suggestions on how the challenges could be addressed.

III. UNIVERSITY STAFF ESTABLISHMENT BY GENDER AND LEVELS

The University of Nairobi is the oldest university in Kenya, established in 1965. The actual numbers were not available within the individual units and departments, partly because the university has recently undergone human reforms and is in now establishing a full-fledged human resources department. Previously, staffs were employment through the recruitment office.

On the overall, the university has a good representation of male and female staffs, even though men are more than the women. Discussions with the key informants revealed that there are higher number of women in the administrative positions compared to the academic and research positions. There were mixed views with some noting that their departments had 50:50 male to female representation ratio, while others noted that their department had more male than female staff at all levels. The general view is that having more male or female is a department is dependent on the discipline and level. Thus, there is a higher representation of females in the non-academic positions compared to those in academic positions. Discipline-wise, the social sciences have more females compared to other departments, like the health and physical sciences. Even then, the number of women in the social sciences is lower in the academic and research ranks compared to the administrative positions. For the admin positions, women tend to occupy most of the secretarial positions, while the men occupy more of the senior administrivia positions.

The view of most KIIs was that, whereas the university had fewer females compared to the males in staffing, it had nonetheless met the constitutional threshold of two-third gender rule, which requires that not more than two thirds of any elective or appointive position in the government of Kenya shall be of the same gender. The two-third gender rule is one of the affirmative actions enshrined in the Constitution of Kenya in Article 27(8) of the Bill of right to help enhance equality. This principle, when applied in the university context, means that at least a third of the staff should be female or male. The views of the KIIs were that the university is making efforts to ensure that it meets this constitutional requirement by having women (just like the men) being appointed or elected to various positions of the university. Other observations were that women are getting recruited into the university through scholarships and that and if this trend continues, the number of women in the academic ranks will continue to rise, thus positioning them in the leadership pathway. Despite this, women remain underrepresented in the University. similar observations were made by ARUA (2021)¹ who noted that women academic staff are underrepresented in African Universities. Several reasons were cited to explain the male-female staffing variation at the university of Nairobi.

- a) **The fall-out of women out of academic career pathway** unlike the men. While the university has good representation of female and male students, fewer women compared to their male counterparts get into the academic career which begins from undergraduate, to masters, and PhD. At undergraduate and Master's, there tend to be more women than men, but the trend shifts at PhD level; hence a transition gap that keeps women out of higher education career that would give them entry into leadership jobs at HEIs.

- b) **Retirement without replacement.** The HEIs in Kenya are constantly faced with recruitment challenges whenever employment and promotion are frozen. The need to streamline human resources and to reduce the wage bill has resulted in a situation where senior members of staff are not replaced when they retire. Thus, when senior staff retire (both women and men), they are not replaced in the same numbers and for the same positions.
- c) **The university 2020 reforms and reorganization.** The recently undertaken human reforms (2020) were associated with the reduced number of women in the University. As noted,

'The reforms and restructuring process led to exit of women, some of whom were retrenched ... the females were there but they were transferred, some exited naturally...' – (KII 1, female chair of department, worked at UoN for 23 years).

IV. PATHWAY FOR PROMOTION OF WOMEN INTO LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

The University has a promotion policy which provides for equal treatment of women and men and is guided by the Commission for University Education commonly known as CUE. However, there is no clear pathway for promotion of women into leadership. The pathway for women and men is similar and there is no gender differentiated pathway for women. Hence, both men and women are treated equally, and they must qualify and compete to get promoted. There were nonetheless some respondents who felt that whereas the university policy is gender-neutral in as far as promotions are concerned, there are instances where women are not accorded same chances and opportunities as their male counterparts. One respondent noted that,

'...women are not accorded the same opportunity as men... you just hear somebody has been appointed the chair... a director... a chair of this committee. Yes, so there is no level playing ground' - (KII 1, Female Professor, 39 years at UoN).

Furthermore, some KIIs noted that if two candidates (male and female) present themselves and perform equally well, there is likelihood that the female will be given the opportunity. This view was however negated by some KIIs who felt that women are not accorded any preferential treatment and that they are disadvantaged because unlike the men who lobby and negotiate their positions, women wait to be given. As noted, while both women and men are subjected to the same criteria, there is a tendency to favor men in the leadership pathway compared to the women. A KII noted that, *'out of about sixty-six chairs of departments, the women could be less than ten'* - (KII 1, female chair of department, worked at UoN for 23 years). Another female respondent observed that;

I cannot directly say I saw what a lot of these studies are looking for. I have not seen open gender discrimination which is just directed at one gender. The ones that exist are very silent and usually difficult to pick, probably when it gets to promotions. Mine took so long. I had the qualifications, I applied, shortlisting is

done, but each and every step of my promotion took almost 5, 6 to 7 years even when I was ready...I do not know, one can argue silently that others may be used networks to fast track. There have been arguments that people use networks to fast-track promotions if you know the system ... mine I normally file them and wait. KII, Female Respondent, at UoN for 32 years.

There is also a gender view that the university has been making efforts, at least in the last five years, to increase women representation at all levels. In fact, some respondents noted that with the present trend, it is likely that the university will have more women than men in higher level positions in the coming years. Whereas the employment and promotion criteria are applied uniformly for men and women, women are encouraged to apply but they must meet the requirements and the criteria. There nonetheless subtle ways that still make women to lag or to fail to qualify for promotion.

I think there is no bias the only thing is that we do argue even in literature that promotions are not easy for women because of the externalities that women engage in. You see what promotion is looking for is, have you brought research grants, and you find that a lot of women are not able to be PI's or to look for projects which they lead; or to have a number of them because of extra engagements. You have research work, you have to work weekend, you have to work late.' KII, Female Respondent, at UoN for 32 years.

V. WHETHER GENDER EQUITY IS IMPORTANT IN UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP

Gender equity in university leadership is considered important. First because the university has both female and male students, therefore it is important to have both female and males in leadership. As noted, *'gender equity is very important because, left as it is, it will just be university for men ran by men'* – Female Professor. The balance also creates harmony in the university by motivating both women and men, without either feeling left out. Promoting men only could discourage women, and unfortunately, some key informant observed that this happens to be the trend and as noted, *'women are not given the same opportunities at the top positions compared to the men,'* - (KII 1, female chair of department, worked at UoN for 23 years). Other arguments are that men and women may be wired differently and have 'necessary differences' even in leadership. Thus, gender equity enables women and men to bring different perspectives into a leadership and management. As noted,

Gender equity is important in every sector, every institution, every organization, including university. We know we have not been very good at the top management level, we have had more males, but when you look at equity, we look at issues of who benefits for example, opportunities, how many are we taking out there? How many people at masters are we taking out there to study? If there are projects and we are giving scholarships, who are we giving? If there are other opportunities available who is getting? I think that is where the issue

is, I cannot give it one word. I think it differs in different sectors. When it comes to top management, we have seen it skewed and to an extent women are not that many there. A few are there, but historically there were no women there. So, equity begins by making sure there is a bit of equality, because how can we ensure equity, if we have not even recruited you to be the department? For example, if we are all male, how can we discuss gender equity? I think it varies in all sectors. But in general, its meant to be fair, and right now the university is conscious of it, so there are people paying attention to ensuring there is university equity in terms of resources and opportunities. KII, Female Professor, served UoN for 32 years.

VI. UNIVERSITY POLICY FOR PROMOTION OF WOMEN INTO LEADERSHIP

The University of Nairobi is guided by external and internal policies and guidelines in instituting its mandate and in the recruitment, promotion, and appointment process. In Kenya, the universities follow the Commission for University Education (CUE) criteria for appointment/ and promotion of all academic staff. This is a merit-based, gender-blind policy that stipulates the requirements for academic positions that one can apply for to get hired or promoted. The criteria are based on academic qualifications, years of teaching experience, research and research grants, publications, and supervision. Some key informants noted that though the guidelines are gender blind, they are tilted in favour of men who have easier access to promotion requirements because they have more time than women to pursue those requirements. Whereas some key informants felt the need to have affirmative action in the CUE guidelines, others felt that this was not imperative because merit is crucial in academia. Data indicates that female key informants were more likely than male informants to favour affirmative action in the promotion criteria, as exemplified in the following quotes:

...at the University, there is no affirmative action to give women less workload to ease the burden of their triple roles. They [University] does not care. Nobody cares about the progression of women; they do not care. They do not change criteria to make it easier for women. Men are moving to progress while women are gobbling. (Female, senior management, over 30 years in UoN).

So, what I am saying is, ideally, in any institution, we need, in a competitive environment and industry like academia, you need the best brains. Because you do not want to just pick people because they were women. I think I do not fully support the idea that women should just be promoted because they are women. They should be promoted because they are competitive, and they are aggressive in due course. (Male, former Department Chair, 37 years in UoN).

You cannot say you will lack leaders who are qualified, so you now have to change the policy in order to include them. And I do not think that should happen. Just think of the university in its entirety. You do not want to train a surgeon because they are a woman if they are not qualified for it. They will mess up; they will kill people. Or a civil engineer because they are a woman

even though they do not qualify, they will have buildings collapse. You give people positions because they are qualified for those positions. And we do not lack qualified women in this country, in this university. (Male, Department Chair 1, 26 years in UoN)

Many key informants also mentioned the existence of a gender policy to address the equal treatment of men and women, it is not concerned with the promotion of academic staff. Most interview participants were familiar with the 2/3rds gender rule embedded in the Constitution of Kenya 2010. Article 27(8) of the Constitution provides that the State shall take steps to ensure that no more than two-thirds of members of all elective and appointive positions are of the same gender. While this provision is a positive move for increasing the number of women in leadership, many participants felt that the provision existed in theory and that the University was yet to fully actualize it. A male administrator pointed out that,

We are struggling just like parliament is struggling.... there is no point when we say that a certain position is locked for a certain gender. But when we are reporting, we normally report that this is the tribal (ethnic) balance, this is the gender balance.

Another participant highlighted the challenge of implementing the gender rule because sometimes there are biased practices that prevail in appointments:

.. if you are known by the VC or known by the people up there in the tower, of course you will be chair or you will be the director or you will be given a position (Female, senior management, 39 years in UoN).

However, for other participants, the University had made some attempts to adhere to the gender rule by balancing employment opportunities. For instance, a male department Chair provided a scenario showing that where three positions were available and the first 3 qualified applicants were male while the fourth was a woman, there was tendency to give the 3rd post to a woman, for gender balancing. A similar view was held by a former male chair of department who stated that the University system does not need to have a highly structured way of promoting women, it can be done informally where both men and women have qualified:

I will say this because in one of our previous recruitments, there was one position, but you see normally sometimes there are two positions which are vacant. And therefore, though we were going for one, one of the ladies performed so well as number two, to the level where we decided to recruit her even if against a position which existed. You know, we were ideally supposed to recruit only one.

Data demonstrates that there were differences between male and female key informants regarding whether gender policies favor women or not. To many men, women ought to be competitive and qualified while women argued for gender equity that recognizes and addresses the implicit barriers to this competitiveness. Some male informants felt that “the policy must be actualized through the self... you must first have the drive as a woman.” For them, women in academia must first achieve the required characteristics and attributes and then actively seek

leadership and positions so that the policy can support them, in reverse order. As noted by another male participant, without such motivation to meet the criteria for leadership in the institution, women should not expect that a policy would help them because it does not exist to seek out women for appointment to top positions. Yet another stated that the women in leadership were there because they qualified and not because “they are propped up by policy...and this is what needs to prevail.”

VII. UNIVERSITY POLICIES AND SYSTEMS EFFECTIVENESS IN EMPOWERING WOMEN TO PARTICIPATE IN LEADERSHIP

The general perception among key informants was that existing policies are not practically set up for positive discrimination aimed at having more women in senior academic and leadership positions in a merit-based institution. It was, thus, difficult to judge the effectiveness of the policies. Whereas this was the common view, some participants observed that women do not push enough to get promoted. Even when both men and women have an equal chance of getting promoted, often, ‘women wait to be given the promotion whereas the men canvas.’ Consequently, men get promoted much quicker than women, as exemplified in the following quotes:

Men can follow up their promotions more easily than women. Women find it difficult to keep following and they tend to trust the system. We are a bit reserved. We fear going to offices (female, UASU leadership).

...We have many women like that, who stay silent, because one, they do not have the extra time to run around like men, who will get advice from others. For women time is so limited, by the time, you finish one thing you want to run to another thing. So, I think they can suffer disadvantages because of ignorance, or this proactiveness is sometimes limited in many women. Men tend to be proactive; they know they deserve a promotion and go for it. Being proactive makes things work (Female, Full professor, in leadership, 30 years in UoN)

These female participants, among others, felt that women were more trusting of the system structures to work in their favour. On the contrary, one must proactively push for promotion because the system does not work seamlessly. This disadvantages many women who may not have time or are fearful of approaching offices to push for their promotions. To some participants, the result of these male-female differences in systems trust and proactivity makes the policies inefficient because the top leadership will not come looking for an academic staff to promote; one must push for a promotion or appointment. However, this argument places the burden on the individual rather than on those who manage these systems. Another reason for why the gender policies are not effective is because University staff are not aware about the policy provisions. To one participant:

People do not read them, so how does it empower you? They do not read them; they do not know. Many do not know of these policies. ...You ask, and very few people know they exist, so you cannot be empowered by what you do not know. So, continuous sensitization is very much needed. There is an assumption that

everybody knows about policies, but every time people are very ignorant because if you know the provisions of a policy, you can claim your rights, but if you do not know the provisions of a policy you will not even know that your rights are being abused. So, it is a dilemma, I do not know how to respond to you, but I know a majority do not know of the provisions.... (Female, Full professor in leadership, 30 years in UoN)

Other participants were emphatic that the policies were ineffective because the University lacked the initiative to promote gender equity. To these participants, the university was not focused on eliminating gender imbalances, and women who were in leadership positions were there because they qualified and not because of affirmative action:

The nature of the university is that we do little to promote women into administrative leadership positions – for example, in cases where a department has not had a woman Chairperson, the university should deliberately appoint a woman who merits into that position. The university ought to be conscious about senior leadership and prioritize women into leadership positions if they qualify for those positions. (Male Ass Dean, 30 years in UoN)

“Nature of University” here means that it is the norm for the university to not adequately consider appointing women to leadership positions even when they merit. Suggestions such as those offered by the key informant above, to be deliberate in the appointment of women, are a good step towards gender equity and making the policies effective.

Data shows that participants who prioritized merit-focus, rather than gender equity suggested that the policies were effective because the pathway to senior positions and leadership was clearly spelt out in the policies and there was no need to focus, specifically on gender. As suggested by a female Ass Dean, the policies were effective because:

If you meet the criteria, you are shortlisted, attend an interview, then you are appointed... As long as you meet them, the opportunities are there. And there is no discrimination whether you are a man or woman.

Thus, to them, if an individual met the criteria for promotion, the opportunity to get promoted was present for both men and women, equally. Another female key informant was quick to warn that, “Not all women are alike. Some women feel they are in leadership because they have achieved. They think coming together as women to help each other is weak.”

These discussions suggest that women need to be aware of the policy provisions and to come together to push for their implementation because the system may not obviously address these concerns. Moreover, in addition to the work needed to meet promotion requirements, they must push for those promotions, as men do.

VIII. WHETHER THE UNIVERSITY IS DOING ENOUGH TO MOTIVATE WOMEN AND ACCORD THEM SAME OPPORTUNITIES TO GET INTO LEADERSHIP

The general observation is that the University has not done enough to motivate women to get into leadership. Few women are in top university management, and it takes longer to promote women, and this delays their rising into leadership. As noted by a key informant,

‘...to promote women, it takes longer time than the males. A male can be promoted, and you have the same qualification, you publish, you have done everything. For you to be promoted, it takes almost three years, while the male was promoted a year ahead of you’ - (KII 1, female chair of department, worked at UoN for 23 years).

Regarding top positions at the university, men are the majority at the top, even though women are increasingly occupying top positions. A few women have in the past held the Deputy Vice Chancellor (DVC) and the current DVC for Research Innovation and Enterprise is female. This gives hope that there may be a female VC in the future, like some other Universities have had. Other positions held by women include that of the Chancellor (outgoing), heads of sections, chairs of departments, directors, and union representatives. While compared to other universities in the country, the University of Nairobi appears to be rigid in getting women to ascend to top positions, a phenomenon referred to by a participant as the ‘deputy curse.’ That in most cases, women tend to hold deputy positions, not the topmost powerful positions, including in the Unions. A male participant also noted that there was tendency to “force” female DVCs out of the University when they aspire for top leadership to pave way for male ascension to the top position. Yet we have examples of women who have led exemplarily well in other Universities in the country.

Asked why the University of Nairobi had not had a woman VC despite it being the oldest in the country, one participant stated that:

Being a leader is generally difficult at UoN, you read about the barriers even in autobiographies. Some autobiographies have described the difficulties of becoming a VC in UoN. People have to cut deals along the way to the top, both getting there and staying at the top, you have to cut deals.... So UoN leadership is not for the faint hearted for both men and women. There are many challenges for people aspiring to be leaders at UoN. For example, the politics to destabilize the University, inciting students, staff politics. All these are meant to block one in accessing leadership positions.... There are machinations at the top and women keep off those positions and thus contribute to fewer leadership positions at the top. (Male, Dean)

Echoing the sentiments above, a female in a senior leadership position spoke about how she did not want to accept a leadership position noting that:

It is quite difficult for women—there are interests in the University. There is masculinized leadership, if you are female, you are just a flower girl. I had refused to be in management because it did not align with my values of respect for leadership. To avoid being appointed as a leader, I moved to consultancies. When I was appointed to a leadership position, I first declined and I went and talked to my church pastor who told me that I was like Jonah (of the Bible, who got swallowed by a fish to deliver a message) that I could not run away from leadership. He persuaded me to take the position and I yielded. Female Professor.

Many participants acknowledged that because University appointments and promotions are merit based, then there seems to be equal opportunity for men and women to assume those positions. However, if we examine the organization of gender roles in society, women suffer disadvantage in access to top positions as well as prejudice and resistance when they occupy top leadership positions. For instance, a female participant narrated women's multiple roles at work, family and community which combined to constrain and delay their ability to meet the requirements for top positions. Women bear the heaviest burden of care in their families and hence have lesser time than men to meet requirements for promotion and appointments, such as research, research grants, participation in conferences, and publications. In contrast, men have more time that they can use to create collaborative networks for research and publications, and for travel. Thus, for many women, particularly those in the reproductive age and with young families, time poverty contributes to the challenges they face in accessing top positions. A participant noted that:

Promotions can be not easy for women because of the externalities' that women engage in. You see promotion is looking for, have you brought research grants, and you find that a lot of women are not able to be PI's or to look for projects which they lead or to have a number of them because of extra engagement. You have research work, you have to work weekend, you have to work late.... We have even a gender policy that supports us, but when it comes to research, and engagement and scoring research, you can find women are lagging behind so even if you go and look at PI's, that you can look at as secondary data. How many women are PI's? You might find that women are not many, and even when you may want to look at how many researches are running and how many women are there. (Female, full professor, in Leadership)

This key informant also felt that while on the surface men and women enjoy equal opportunity to access top positions, there other hidden and subtle practices that hinder these opportunities:

They are very silent, things like projects can turn women down and you must have supervised, and sometimes you have nobody to supervise, or you have been allocated, or people are allocating in a skewed manner. So, things that pull women are not open, the rules are very clear there is no regulation or policy that discriminate women. ...Now research grant also come with PHDs, students tied to them, so, it also gives you an opportunity to supervise a PhD

student as you are also in the project. If you are not in the project, you may not supervise that PhD. So, there are many externalities that can make a female who is not able to spend more than 8 hours, because academics, need to have to spend more than 8 hours. You cannot work 8 hours a day, you will never make it. (Female, Full professor, in leadership)

These discussions suggest that the system offers equal opportunity through the merit-based criteria but there are both explicit and implicit barriers that affect the achievement of these qualification, and consequently, access to leadership positions. For women, even overcoming the glass ceiling does not guarantee an end to gender-based stereotypical challenges. Instead, women contend with additional leadership-specific biases and stereotypes based on their gender, qualities, and abilities to lead effectively. Many people hold the perception that women do not make good leaders, and this attracts resistance to their authority. These perceptions are founded in broader societal beliefs that equate leadership with masculinity often leading to negative perceptions of female leaders who do not conform to such expectations. These biases discourage women from aspiring to lead and is a great obstacle to women's careers progression because it demands significant effort and perseverance. Both the conscious and unconscious practices that block opportunities for women to access leadership in the University speak to these leadership biases. From the discussions above, the University has not done enough to level opportunities for women. In fact, as the participant in the quote above pointed out, these biases make many women reluctant to offer themselves for leadership positions in the University.

IX. FEMALE VERSUS MALE LEADERSHIP PREFERENCES

Participants appreciated both male and female leadership in the university. Both male and female leaders play pivotal roles, and each has a unique contribution in leadership and are humane. The general feeling in the discussions was that women contribute in a unique manner to shaping decisions on issues that are likely to be overlooked but are critical for the university. This includes such basic things as having clean toilets and sanitary pad disposal.

To most key informants, both men and women, the best way to judge preference for male or female leadership would be to focus on performance as opposed to the gender of the person. They described female leaders as efficient, effective, and committed to their work and what they strive to do. Nonetheless, there are also those who fail, just like men, and have been implicated in corrupt practices. To some participants, leadership positions had clear rules and policies and the leaders' role was to ensure that these were followed. In most views, most men and women had performed well in their leadership role at the University. Moreover, men and women complemented each other because of their different styles of leadership and abilities. For instance, some participants perceived men as more "risk takers while women are soft in leadership, build horizontal relationships, care more, and think about sustainability." To such participants, these are complementary skills needed in leadership and, therefore, what is required is a "strong presence of women, not necessarily women-only."

However, there were biases in preference. For instance, a male participant while stating that he had no preference for either male or female leader, felt that women were more empathetic and

had ability to create a more cohesive team which would make them “more effective than men, if they learn to focus on the work.” The emphasis on the need for women to ‘learn to focus on their work’ indicated a bias towards male leadership as more effective. This participant further noted that:

From my personal experience with women leaders, they have not been good. This is because they were put in those positions because of affirmative action or have been given the position as a favour by somebody to whom they are answerable. (Male, Dean)

A few participants expressed their preference for male leadership in terms of men’s task-orientation and objectivity in contrast with female’s emotional and relationship-oriented style which could make it challenging for women to lead, as noted by this female participant:

I think male. There is something also about male leadership that is very positive. Sometimes I feel like male leadership also brings in a sense of objectivity that is necessary for an organization and an ability to engage without being immersed in the whole thing emotionally. So, you are there, you are involved, you are what, but it is not the kind of thing that if something happens, it is going to bring you emotionally down and therefore you cannot function. So, I think that for me, that is what I would say, male. (Female, Department Chair)

An explanation for the preference of male leaders may be deeply instilled in gender stereotypes and leadership-specific biases held by both men and women. The societal cultural model of a leader is masculine: leaders are perceived to be people who are competitive, dominant, are confident and in-charge. These qualities are ascribed to men more than women. Women are seen as just nice.

For a few participants, however, there was strong preference for female leadership as elaborated by this male key informant:

I would prefer women in top leadership, because of the following reasons: to show society that women can be in those positions; for students to start acknowledging that women can be on top; and for young female generations to start learning early that they too are capable of reaching those high positions (women leaders as role models). (Male, Associate Dean)

I think women make good leaders. Where there are women, things change, and things are improved. These positive changes trickle down to communities where even girls are encouraged that they too can become leaders. Women need to go into the society and contribute and make a difference for people to see that women are equally capable and can even be better. Female Professor, 27 years at UoN.

Others were of the view that though some female leaders can “behave like men by being cruel and engaging in corrupt practices,” in the main women had more commitment to leadership, and were more sensitive:

But I would have no problem having them (women) at the top. They are a little more sensitive. And if they go there because they know the world is looking at them, most of them tend to, based on the experience from other institutions, they tend to excel... Of course, there will be a few rotten elements here and there. (Male, former Department Chair)

From the two quotes above, support for female leaders stemmed more from the impact it can have in society: that having women leaders may serve as role models and motivate other women to pursue leadership roles themselves. This can help to break down gender stereotypes and contribute to greater gender equality in society. Moreover, women are seen as sensitive and are aware that people are examining their performance, so they must strive to be effective. This further suggests the unconscious gender biases in leadership. Interviews with female participants highlighted that women must work extra hard to demonstrate, that like their male counterparts, they can achieve. Though their idea was not to compete but to use their positions to ensure that they delivered the best of their mandate and responsibility.

X. CHALLENGES HINDERING WOMEN FROM ASSUMING TOP UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

There are challenges that hinder women from assuming top university leadership positions that are personal, institutional, structural, and societal as described below.

a) Personal

- **Multiple gender roles of production and reproduction.** Women work in a ‘double-shift’ and play triple roles of combining work, family, and societal responsibilities. This causes them to lag in their career path and some could decline higher level positions due to the heavy demand that is place on them. As noted, *‘the thing that slows down female members of staff is family commitments... women may not be able to get into research as much as their male colleagues are able to. Also, earlier on in the career, women are likely to be taking maternity leave which may disrupt them.* KII, Female Professor, 27 years at UoN.
- **Reluctance by women to offer themselves for leadership.** Women are reluctant to offer themselves for leadership or to lobby or navigate the leadership pathway compared to the men. This is attributed to the multiple gender roles that overburdening women, making it difficult for them to take on additional responsibilities.
- **Innate fear of leadership.** The fear of leadership and of what leadership positions entail and what they mean for women is real. Women fear to be caught up in leadership

wrangles, to not perform, or to be perceived negatively. Some are unable to overcome the fear and flee whenever they sense that leadership is looming. Such fears if unresolved will make women to remain outside of leaders, and to even fail to get promoted as they might keep hoping from one job to another, thus remaining horizontally at the same level and not rise vertically. A female key informant noted that;

I had refused to be in leadership because it did not align with my values of respect for leadership. To avoid being appointed as a leader, I moved to consultancies... I did not want to be Chair or Dean. I also went into church leadership ... I refused to take leadership roles... until when I realized that I could not run away from leadership... there is no mechanism for helping women not to run away from leadership. That is why handholding is necessary for building resistance mechanisms. KII, Female Professor.

b) Institutional

- **Promotion stagnation.** To get into the higher positions, one must have been promoted to some level. However, if one stagnates, it takes long for them to get promoted and to be ready for leadership or move to the next level. Such a trend demotivates and discourages women, and many adopt a ‘don’t care attitude’ and eventually they just retire or exit the university.
- **Institutional structures that prevent women from rising into leadership.** For instance, whereas the policy on promotion exists and is applied equally for both men and women, there are instances where women do not get promoted because the criteria used require ‘women to prove’ that they have qualified, yet men are not subjected to the same conditions. As noted, ‘men can go up there and talk, and they are called for interviews, while the ladies wait for the interview, they are not called, it takes a bit longer... promotion tends to lean towards the men than on the women’ - (KII 1, female chair of department, worked at UoN for 23 years). A female respondent noted that;

These are very silent, things like projects can turn women down, and you must have supervised, and sometimes you have nobody to supervise, or you have been allocated, or people are allocating in a skewed manner. So, things that pull women are not open, the rules are clear there is no regulation or policy that discriminate women. We have even a gender policy that supports us, but when it comes to research, and engagement and scoring research, you can find women are lagging so even if you go and look at PI's, that you can look at as secondary data. How many women are PI's? You might find that women are not many, and even when you may want to look at how many researches are running and how many women are there. KII, Female Respondent, at UoN for 32 years.

- **Promotion and employment freezing.** As noted during the interviews, the first point of getting promotion is getting to know, first when positions are advertised, especially one the freezing of employment or promotion is lifted. The second step is making the application and getting shortlisted, and this is often a main challenge as this is often done administratively by units that are external to the departments that advertise for the positions. Part of the problem has been the lack of a human resources department within the University, but this is now being developed and staffed.

XI. HOW CHALLENGES FACING WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP CAN BE ADDRESS

The challenges facing women could be addressed through several ways, among them: -

- a) **Encouraging women to offer themselves for leadership.** According to a KII, women should offer themselves for leadership, and not just wait for the policy to work for them.
- b) **Mentorship forums for women.** The University of Nairobi has produced some of the top women leaders. Such women could be used to motivate, mentor, and prepare upcoming and young women into and for leadership. Women leaders should also be supported to mentor the young ones so that by the time the exit leadership, they have molded other female leaders. As noted, *'this should be about holding each other's hands, like what is happening in UK. They hold each other's hands, by the time they are leaving, there is already a leader... but here you go, there is no plan, XZ will come and fumble her way ...'* – (KII 1, female chair of department, worked at UoN for 23 years).
- c) **Establishing a leadership academy** to train and build the capacity of women on leadership as opposed to leaving women to learn and experience leadership in their own way. Through training, women should be prepared on leadership and pathway to leadership. Presently, *'there is no proper preparation. There should be training. There should be capacity building. At the top, there should be role models'* - (KII 1, female chair of department, worked at UoN for 23 years). The training can be offered by women who have held leadership positions who can share their experiences and mentor the young ones, and mentor them to take leadership positions. The training should also focus on what is needed upon taking up leadership to understand what to expect and how to respond in different contexts. A female respondent noted that;

I am worried about the lower cadre women because there are no programs to support them... There is hope for those in mid-level career. As I said we need a sisterhood movement, a mentorship network that deals with sexual harassment, research grants, work-life balance, physical exercise, mentoring, grooming, eating well, coping with high intensity jobs, strengthening-avoiding negative energy, fear/failure, academic progression etc. KII, Female Professor.

- d) **Quantifying the cost of gender-leadership gap.** It is important for the intuitions of higher learning to take stock of what they lose by not having women in effective leadership positions. As noted by a female key informant, *'universities have never quantified the cost of the gender gap. They would rather talk about output not gender... The new constitution requires reporting on gender equity and parity...at every level even in student leadership.'*
- e) **Incentives to support women to remain in the University, to seek promotions and to take leadership roles.** Scholarships and research support are avenues that could help to build a critical mass of women in the university, as well as retain them. Some departments are already practicing this, for instance, given women preference in allocation of scholarships. Research financing is another area where women can be supported to excel in, as a pathway into university leadership.
- f) **Openness and enabling women to voice their concerns.** As noted, *'...if things are done without openness, women may not necessarily be in those places ... if they are discussed in some boardroom somewhere... in bars... in some place women are not, then they will not know...when you look at what women do, apart from just working, they also, ... play both the reproductive and the productive roles. So, with these, they may not necessarily have 100% time to be where men are'* - Female Professor, 39 years at UoN.
- g) **Adhering to the constitutional requirements** of the one-third gender rule at the minimum; even the views of the majority were that the university should apply a 50:50 rule to demonstrate to the society the need to give women chance to lead.
- h) **Supporting women to remain leadership positions and pathways.** Once women have been in leadership, they should be supported to remain in such positions. This however is not the case and often, women exit leadership when their time ends, and many do not venture or aspire to accept other leadership positions or roles. In some cases, women retreat or escape from leadership also termed as taking a 'flight out of leadership.' Remaining in leadership requires support and incentives to encourage to aspire for higher level positions and roles. As noted, *women just do what they can do, and when their time expires, they just to away'* - (KII 1, female chair of department, worked at UoN for 23 years).
- i) **Having a clear safeguarding policy that demonstrates the Universities commitment to supporting women leadership.** A safeguarding policy is important, beyond having the Gender policy, whereby issues affecting women in leadership can be presented and resolved so that women do not have to exit leadership.
- j) **Initiatives to give visibility to women leadership.** Raising women's visibility in leadership, by giving them prominence and publicity, as well as using affirmative action – or what some respondents termed as 'positive discrimination' - can help to increase and affirm women's positions and role in leadership. This would in turn inspire younger women to aspire to assume leadership. As noted by a key informant, *'women need to play*

an active role in publicizing whatever they do...you cannot hide your success. If you conceal your success....' Male KII.

- k) **Using different methods to highlight, lobby and advocate for women in leadership.** One suggestion is the use of theater, especially with the young people to pass messages on the important of having women and supporting them in leadership. The social media can also be used to highlight and publicize the work that women leaders are doing and learn about successful women leaders who can also function as role models for the young women.
- l) **Making women leaders differentiate between leadership and loyalty.** The general observation was that being appointed to leadership positions could make to fear questioning issues that need questioning due to the need to show allegiance and loyalty to the appointing authorities. Hence, one might not question even issues affecting the women.

XII. ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY IN SOCIETY IN RELATION TO WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP AND GENDER DISPARITIES

The University of Nairobi, being the oldest premier university in Kenya and one of the oldest in Africa, has a crucial role to play in promoting women leadership. There was consensus that the university should position women in leadership so that they become role models to other women in Kenya and beyond. They pointed out universities that have demonstrated women leadership in top positions, for instance Kenyatta University, Jomo Kenyatta University of Science and Technology, and Maasai Mara University. The University of Nairobi needs to emulate these other universities and to influence societal attitudes on women in leadership.

Many key informants stated that the University should promote more women researchers so that they can actively engage in research for development in the society. Considering the challenges that many women face in accessing research opportunities, the University can deliberately target to train women on proposal development, access to research opportunities and link them to collaborative research networks and research opportunities. This way the society would have more women research leaders to inform development and to close the gender gap in research.

Other participants highlighted the need for the University to make women's leadership visible, for instance, by being deliberate in appointing women to leadership positions. This way, people would see women's contribution in leadership and thus inspire more women to assume leadership positions in society. A female participant suggested a rotational approach in leadership to make women leadership visible:

I think we have key role, just like our national policy says. Our national policies are clear about inclusion. As a concept there is inclusion, and in inclusion gender has been a key one.... We still have concerns as UoN. I do not think I have seen the university being deliberate about this, maybe in a few

cases it is done behind the scenes. For example, I always argued let us embrace rotational approach, it is easier, its good. If the director of an institution has been male this time, then the next one should be female, and that's a very good way of bringing people up, even that weak person, now she'll be the next, we look at abilities, we look at ...among the female you are the next. It does not matter whether you are of age, or male and female, we make you a director... (Female Full professor, in Leadership position)

In addition, a male participant suggested profiling women University leaders to inspire younger women:

If we can give our women leaders in the university some prominence. The second thing is also the university has instruments, apart from publicizing the top leadership. You know we have a movie theater, the theater which has been going around, sometimes it goes around. And I think if they build in their teams, their messages. Those two would move the country in the right direction. The most in leadership, publicity, ensuring that whatever women do in the university is pronounced and publicized, whether through the social media, particularly these days because of the social media. You know so that the young people see people are succeeding because nobody wants to, every young person wants to be ambitious. They will only be ambitious if they see success. (Male, former Department Chair)

Other participants felt that the University had a critical role to play in deconstructing societal gender biases and stereotypes in female leadership, as exemplified by the following:

Traditionally, right from the family level, there has been a wrong belief that women cannot be leaders. The university's role is to show that anyone can lead. I also do not believe that it is the university's business to lie to the society that one gender makes better leaders than the other, because it is not true. (Male, Department Chair 2)

To do this, the University itself needs to have programmes that motivate women to assume leadership roles, like training and mentorship. The University should also live by example in appointing women to leadership positions and believing in their abilities. A female participant was of the view that in the past, the University has not been very receptive of female Chair of Council who are “*bundled out ...through numerous court cases.... but when it is a man there have been no court cases.*” Thus, to change the narrative, the University has first to change itself from biases against female leaders in the institution.

In contrast to male and female participants who saw the need for the University to change societal attitudes on female leadership, and other gender biases, a male key informant argued that:

My personal view is that I do not really believe in this gender disparities and inequality arguments. I look at men and women as fundamentally different. Biologically we are different; we are wired differently to some extent. I would say that when we measure disparities in a mechanical way putting percentages, we are missing the point. I would say, let every person fit their role. I do not think promoting women leadership will remove gender disparities per say. They will remove the leadership on paper by putting women in leadership who are answerable to men. I believe in the natural order of things. The whole argument of gender inequality is distorting society. We should have people playing the roles for which they are best suited. Whether there are more men or more women, it does not really matter. It is a matter of competency and delivery. (Male, Dean)

There was no elaboration of this assertion, but by invoking biological difference between men and women and “the natural order of things,” this participant seemed to declare his belief that men are born leaders and that gender equality efforts distort this reality. To him, therefore, men and women should play their separate natural biological roles, they roles “they are best suited for,” whatever those roles are.

Another male participant (department Chair 2) suggested that the University was playing its role in advocating for women and ought to also focus on men because women were surpassing men in some departments. This claim was to suggest that the University had to be careful in its role of promoting women leadership at the expense of tilting the gender balance to men’s disadvantage in society. However, this was contrary to the widely held opinion by almost all key informants of a clear gender gap in senior academic and leadership positions.

In general, there was consensus that the University should play a greater mandate in supporting women leadership, and addressing the challenges that prevent women from taking on leadership roles. The need for inclusive gender policies and action was repeatedly highly, including focusing on specific needs of women, for instance those with disability who might have to combine reproductive and productive roles, and may not be provided with the supportive services. As noted,

The university should be at the forefront in showing that they are practicing what they preach. So, if you are preaching about gender equality... if you are talking about gender balance...women empowerment, if you are talking about all those things that have made women not be in positions of leadership, then the university should be at the forefront...That it can be showcasing that we have lactating rooms. We have breastfeeding rooms. We have a creche. We have all these facilities, and we are also following the two-third gender rule... that it is not just a classroom thing.’ KII, Female Professor, 39 years at UoN.

Universities have a role to serve and connect with society and communities and should make itself relevant by responding to the needs of society. As noted,

Universities exist because communities exist. In the last 10 years, the university the university has embodied the aspirations of the society. We have a vision to have a university that is relevant to the community and linked to vision 2030, and Agenda 63. We must be deliberate in embracing this. Who are we teaching for and for whom we are doing research? But the University is still a gated community other than being a gateway to community. Female Professor.

Beyond enabling women to get into leadership in the higher education institutions, there is a broader reality which is linked to the government policies and creating structures that enable young women to access university education. As noted,

The government does not care. The emphasis is not on student-centered learning but on student centered funding. The enabling framework for universities is yet to be changed. There are challenges in funding. KII, Female Professor.

XIII. WOMEN LEADERS' ROLE IN INFLUENCING CHANGE IN SOCIETY

There was unanimity that women leaders in the University can influence change in society by transforming their institutions and places of leadership through good leadership. This way, other women, particularly younger women, would emulate them and aspire to be leaders. The University of Nairobi remained conservative in appointing a woman leader at the top, yet women in other Universities had excelled beyond their universities to influence change in society. The University of Nairobi ought to follow these examples. Moreover, some participants suggested that once in leadership women should:

Being good role models when thy become leaders. You should not get the positions then you become corrupt. Such kind of issues hinders people from thinking women can be good leaders. Grab up those positions and work the way you are expected to work. When you take up the positions and show people that you can work, everybody will accept you. (Male, Department chair 2)

Many participants underscored the need for women to be good leaders and to work hard so that they become role models to other women. Emphasizing the pressure on women to change society through offering transformational and good leadership that can be emulated, another male key informant noted that:

When you have them [women] behaving like men, they motivate no one. Because you would want to see change and say that women can lead better therefore let us try them. But when you get into a position and you are

behaving even worse than the man who was there before, people will shy away from encouraging female leadership. The best way they can influence society is by behaving differently and showing society that they are good leaders. Women should just work to their abilities without trying to prove any point. Because when you try to prove a point, you mess it up. Use your abilities as they are because they are equal abilities with men and once you use them, everything will become clear to everyone. KII, Male, Department Chair 1.

Another participant argued that it was the women's responsibility to ensure they were competitive in society to package themselves in a way that is acceptable to change the mentality of the society about women's leadership:

So, I am saying first is to ensure women produce competitive academic products that are sellable around the world. The second thing is for women themselves to offer themselves for leadership, so that they can then be seen to be leading, because it is not just enough to wait for a policy, because a policy can only reaffirm what exists. The third thing is to play an active role in publicizing whatever they do, because if you remember even in the Bible, you know, there were these women, I do not know, the five and five and something like that. And somebody, you cannot, you cannot hide your success. If you conceal your success, then you have no business being there. You have to publicize it. KII, Male, Department Chair 1.

A few interviews suggested that women can better change the society by deconstructing the masculine characteristics associated with leadership, and provide a different dimension to what leadership should be—caring and empathetic—as suggested in the following:

By not trying to be like men. They should just be women and talk how they think as women because men do not know that, and they need to know. By being women who are not reacting to men. They should just be women who are not trying to be like men. By doing this, they will bring a fairer society that is sensitive to a dimension that men are weak in (caring and empathy). Women would be more effective leaders if they were just being themselves, not trying to copy men. Having women leaders who are themselves ensures that society is taking advantage of everyone is best (both men and women – balancing men's aggressiveness with women's empathy). KII, Male, Department Chair 2.

The discussion on the role women leaders in the University can create change in the society indicated that women can and should play a key role in influencing change in research, development, and changing societal perceptions and attitudes, among others. These discussions also show that women carry the heaviest burden of transforming societal attitudes on their leadership abilities. A key informant noted for instance that;

'Women need to go into the society and contribute and make a difference for people to see that women are equally capable and can even be better. KII, Female Professor, 27 years at UoN.

End Notes

¹ ARUA (2021). Research Profiles of ARUA Universities: Emerging Trends (2015 – 2017). African Research Universities Alliance.