

**Achieving Sustainable Development through Women's  
Leadership Positions in Higher Institutions**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The paper examines the invaluable role women would play when given opportunity to occupy leadership positions in Nigerian higher institutions. Women are indispensable in the development of any nation because they have managerial abilities. Both men and women occupy leadership positions at this level, but only a few women occupy managerial and academic positions. The women have been relegated to the background. Based on this assumption, the study was carried out in order to ascertain the opinion of university staff towards women's leadership positions at higher institutions and to further observe if the university members of staff want women to occupy leadership positions and if they differ in their views. Research questions were raised and hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance. A survey

## **Introduction**

It has been observed that women are not well represented in managerial and academic positions in higher institutions. This has been attributed *to the* unwillingness of top management *to* appoint them to these positions. Or rather, it may also be due to unwillingness on the part of the women to put themselves forward (Pillai, 2004). Singh (2004) said that in a study carried out in India in 1988, it was discovered that the second reason was responsible for women not occupying top positions. It was observed that the cultural norms could dictate that the role of women in management is secondary to their role in carrying out biological and nurturing functions.

### **Related literature**

To buttress this, Singh (2004) confirmed that women were still heavily under-represented at the senior staff level in Commonwealth Universities. In 2000, out of 125,212 teaching staff at or above senior lecturer level, women numbered 28,310 representing only 22%. India had the lowest (below 20%) percentage of women at senior levels. In the developed Commonwealth Universities, women in senior management positions ranged between 22% and 24%. In the Commonwealth Universities, only 9% of the executive heads are women. In November 2003, Australia had 8 women heads of Higher Education out of 43, Canada had 16 out of 67 and the UK had 12 out of 135. In India, there were 12 women Vice-Chancellors out of 277 regular Universities. New Zealand had no woman Vice-Chancellor. Among other developing countries, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Malaysia had women chief executives while only one of Nigeria's 34 Vice-Chancellors was female. In South Africa, 3 of 18 CEOs were women (ACU Bulletin, March 2004).

In an earlier study on higher institutions in five countries; Bangladesh, India,

that women are clustered in low-paid sex-segregated, dead-end jobs which are an extension of house work. Two theoretical perspectives feature prominently in the discussion of women's leadership positions in higher institutions. They include person-centred approach and structured-centred approach.

### **Theoretical perspectives**

**Person-centred approach.** This approach attributed the dearth of women in leadership positions to the personality, characteristic, attitudes and behavioural skills of women themselves. The underlying assumption of this view is that men and women are different and while men have been socialised and educated for leadership, women have not.

**Structured-centred approach.** The approach sees women as disadvantaged by the absence of other women, by having little power, and by limited access to resources. The underlying premise is that men and women are equally capable of and committed to assuming leadership roles.

However, current evidence strongly suggests that in a university, there is a very significant degree of integration of both the traditional male and the traditional female approach to leadership. Bond (2000) cited Fagenson (1990) and Chitnis (1993) as having found, except with few cases that it was not possible to identify a particular leadership style or attribute as being 'exclusively' associated with a woman or a man. Neither the person-centred nor the structured - centred view made the provision for a possible 'Interactive' effect between the gender and the structure, nor did the proponents of either anticipate that the gender, the structure, and the interaction between them would have a significant effect on leadership.

political and decision-making process at the national level and in Commonwealth Organisations. In 1995 at Auckland, Commonwealth Heads of States again endorsed the propositions that member states should work out strategies for women's full participation in "decision-making processes and structures including political structures at all levels. Local district, national, regional and international through positive and/or affirmative action" (Commonwealth Ministers' Reference Book, 1999/2000). The 1995 Human Development Report (HDR) of the United Nations Development Programme focused in the state of gender relations and women's role in development in the world. In examining the progress made so far, it concluded that it was still an "unequal world" in spite of the progress in developing women's capabilities. Participation of women at the highest decision level in political and economic life should not be underestimated.

Osemeikhian (2000) further emphasises that the participation of women in socio - economic development should not be taken for granted, from early childhood to the end of their lives, many women are involved in social and economic activities. Women support the family financially. They regularly assist their husbands, brothers and other relations who have lost their jobs. This is what Akande (1999) refers to as the 'invisible' contribution of women. Women carry a high share of the total work burden and the policy makers cannot afford

perceptions of female manager than did the male respondents. However, some studies have also revealed that females showed bias against female managers (L'Heureux - Barret).

Results of an unusual study examined obituaries of male and female leaders in the years, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, it revealed that male leaders were consistently over the period described as intelligent and experienced. The characteristics ascribed to the female leaders changed over the years. In 1969 and 1970, they were described as adorable, but in the last decade they were described as highly engaged. Stable characteristics were ascribed to males while unstable characteristics were ascribed to females (Kirchler, Wagner and Bucheleitner 1996 cited in Udegbe 1998) Even in advertisement; women are portrayed in stereotypically different ways from men.

Adeyemi (1999) in a study identifies the difference between the number of females and males in leadership positions and makes the following observations. Two hundred respondents were used for the study. Out of the 45 respondents who were chairmen, directors, and permanent secretaries 81.18% were males while only 10 (18.2%)

**Table 1: Differences between Males and Females in Leadership Positions**

<b>Status</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>%</b>
1. Highest Echelons Chairmen, Directors, Permanent Secretaries	200	45	81.18	10	18.2
2. Middle Echelons Managers, Chief Executives, Principals		60	75	20	25
3. Lower Echelons Supervisors, Clerical Officers, Clerical Assistants		30	46.2	35	53.8
Total		135		65	

**Source:** Adeyemi (1999) Table provided by Researchers.

1. Do University members of staff want women to occupy leadership positions?
2. Do University members of staff differ in their views towards women's leadership positions?
3. What are the factors that hinder women from aspiring to leadership positions?

In order to give focus to the study two hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance. They are as follows: -

1. The University members of staff do not want women to occupy leadership positions.
2. The University members of staff do not differ in their views towards women's leadership positions.

### Methodology

A survey questionnaire was constructed and validated by the researchers. The instrument, fifteen items on a Likert-type format ranging from Strong Agreed (SA), Agreed (A), Disagreed (D) and Strongly disagreed (SD). One miscellaneous item on the respondents' suggestions was included. The content validity was established by the experts at the Institute of Education. Reliability validity was also established. Pearson's Product Moment correlation coefficient was used. The result showed a correlation of 0.69 which is fairly high on the correlation scale, (Itsuokor, 1986). Five hundred (500) members of staff of the Ambrose Alli University were randomly selected.

Out of the 500 copies of the questionnaires administered, 440 responses were received representing 88% retrieval. The respondents comprised 230 males and 210 females. These are members of staff of the Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Z test for a population and Chi-square ( $X^2$ ) Goodness of fit were used for the data analysis of the two hypotheses raised. Percentage ranking order was utilised in prioritising the factors, which militate against women's leadership positions.

### Results and discussion

Table 2: Test on the views of University staff that want women to occupy leadership positions.

Agree	Disagree		Calculated Z	Critical Value	P	Decision
296	144		7.259	1.615	0.05	H <sub>0</sub> rejection

From Table 2 the obtained value of Z is 7.259. Since this value of Z, 7.259 is more than 1.615, we therefore reject the null hypothesis. The data therefore show that majority of university members of staff used for the study favour women's leadership positions. The null hypothesis which states that University members of the staff do not want women to occupy leadership position rejected is therefore rejected. In other words, the university members of staff want women to occupy leadership positions.

**Table 3: X<sup>2</sup> Test indicating the different views of the University members of staff**

Agree	Disagree	DF	Calculated Value X <sup>2</sup>	Critical Value	P	Decision
296	144	1	26.25	3.84	0.05	H <sub>0</sub> rejection

From Table 3 the calculated X<sup>2</sup> is 26.25 is greater than the critical value of 3.84 at 0.05 level of significance with dfl. Since the calculated value of 26.25 is greater than the critical value of 3.84 needed for significance, the null hypothesis which states that the University members of staff do not differ in their views towards women's leadership positions. Consequently, the male and female University members of staff differ significantly in their views towards women's leadership positions.

This corroborates Udegbe's views which stated that there were differences in attitudes towards women with males showing more negative attitudes than females. However, this study did not sectionalise the respondents' views of the males and the females.

**Table 4: Factors That Hinder Women from Aspiring for Leadership Positions**

S/N	Variables	N	Responses	%	Ranking
1.	High level of illiteracy	440	240	55	1 <sup>st</sup>
2.	Lack of Finance		40	9	3 <sup>rd</sup>
3.	Obnoxious cultural practices / (including religion)		135	31	2 <sup>nd</sup>
4.	Sexism		25	25	4 <sup>th</sup>

Responses to question 3 are represented in table 4. The study reveals that 55% of the respondents attribute the dearth of women in leadership positions to high level of illiteracy. High level of illiteracy seems to be the major factor that militates against women's leadership position. This is reaffirmed by Adeyemi (1999) when she states that female marginalization is mainly due to marital responsibilities and low level of illiteracy. Alele - Williams (1997) observes that education of women would make them question the values, beliefs and norms generally accepted by society regarding the relationship between male and female.

Obnoxious cultural practices rank second with 31%. This is obvious especially in rural areas where culture restricts women from being actively involved in their immediate domains let alone the outside world. In some Muslim areas women are in "purdah" based on religious reasons. In 1995, the International Conference of Women in Beijing, China adopted the elimination of all cultural practices, which dehumanize women for example female circumcision, "purdah", wife inheritance, widowhood rites and property inheritance, political offices and economics power were all inclusive. Discrimination against women in all forms were also discussed. These factors may be responsible for marginalization of women thereby perpetuating women's insubordination and their unwillingness to aspire to leadership positions.

However, it is pleasing to note that in both Christianity and Islam women are equated with men in the sight of God. Adebakin (200) after an investigation of the teachings of Islam observes that there is "clear evidence of women's equality with man in what we call today political rights". There

are the rights of election as well nomination to political parties Islam shows justice by restoring to woman the right to inheritance (Vanguard 19, 2002).

Lack of finance ranks third with 9%. One would have expected this to be a major impediment considering the low financial statuses of women because only few women are employed in industries and few of them also attain managerial positions. Hence Bluestone (1970) asserts that women sometimes are unable to find employment in core industries because of industrial barriers erected by firms, unions and by the explicit or implicit action of Government.

However, in a study carried out to assess the economic, political and social impact of co-operatives on rural women in Nsukka in Enugu State, it was revealed that the improved income did not have much impact in transforming the economic structure of women. There was minimal increase in political participation among rural women. The patriarchal social structure prevented the women from owning land and taking honourable titles in the community (Ibeanu and Nzei, (1998). Some scholars have observed that women are excluded from good jobs and good pay.

Sexism is a factor that militates against women's aspiration to leadership positions. But it is not a major factor hence it ranks fourth in the findings of this research. Only 5% of the respondents see sexism as an obstacle to women's leadership positions, Kisekka (1981) sees women as the objects of sexism and advocates of socialisation practices in most families. This is necessary since the early development of social inferiority of women is usually inculcated or internalised in most families. Prejudice against women in homes needs to be curbed. In 1979, the United Nations approved the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against women (CEDAW). Nigeria with several other nations ratified the convention. The implementation of the convention will remain a dream until Nigerian recognises the 'invisible' contribution of women to productivity and national development which invariably leads to sustainable development.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform. Action has highlighted twelve critical areas of concern in the advancement of women. These are; education, decision-making, poverty, health, advancement of women, violence, environment, media, economic structures and politics, economic structures and policies, armed conflicts and the girl child.

The above issues are numerous and require active participation of women in the areas identified above. Women can only succeed in fighting against some of the obstacles mentioned earlier if illiteracy is reduced to the barest minimum, if they have the capacity to acquire means of production such as land, if they can be assigned this means of production, and if they are allowed to partake in decision-making processes. It is only when women are allowed to occupy leadership positions that social and political inequalities between the sexes will be reduced.

It is clear from our findings that majority of the respondents are not opposed to women occupying leadership positions. However, this is an elitist class and there may be need to examine what the other strata of the society feel about women occupying leadership positions.

## **Conclusion**

From our study we have observed that majority of the University members of the staff advocate that women should occupy leadership positions. This view is held by both male and female respondents contrary to the fear entertained in some quarters that women should be seen and not heard, and that their place should only be in the home. Some respondents have made useful suggestions. They want women to be given opportunity to lead because they felt that women have something to offer. They also seem to believe that women are more altruistic than men. And for this reason, they should be given a chance. Some have expressed their utter disappointment at men's leadership because the male leaders are intolerant and would always advocate war than sue for peace.

Udegbe (1998) identifies the characteristics of successful leaders - hard work/drive, intelligence, fairness, determination, integrity / discipline among others. Most women possess these qualities hence in many groups (formal and informal) they are elected as treasurers and financial secretaries.

This study reveals that the major factor militating against women's leadership is high level of illiteracy. This was re-echoed by Okecha (2001) when she asserts that high level of illiteracy is identified as a factor responsible for economic and educational disempowerment of women. Literacy is a virile weapon for cultural, social and political liberation. As Omamor (2000) rightly asserts in highlighting the definition of development, which is sequel to productivity, she has borrowed the words Senanayake:

.....Whatever definitions one chooses to use, wherever there are inequalities between men and women, true development is not being achieved. When women (who make up half of the world's human resources) are trapped in a cycle of poverty and ill-health (an unabated stress) and their potential contribution to development is not realized. Whenever they are by-passed by educational and technological advances and isolated from the mainstream of community action, development is proceeding at half pace. (Woman and the Empowerment of Women in Nigeria 2000; 15)

In addition to illiteracy, obnoxious practices, poverty and sexism are other factors, which are obstacles to women's leadership positions. Unless these problems are tackled at the grassroots no meaningful productivity and national development can take place especially when the active participants (women) are excluded from the scheme of things. Sustainable development will remain a farce until women are allowed to occupy leadership positions.

## **Recommendation**

- Eradication of illiterates at the grassroots level by enlightenment campaigns should be vigorously pursued through workshops, seminars, symposia and conference. Talks should be given on some obnoxious cultural practices such as early marriage of the girl-child, withdrawal of female children from school and sexism. The current estimates of number of children out of schools 100 million, 60% of them are girls (Vanguard June 29, 2002, United Nations 1998).
- There should be adult literacy campaign for dropouts
- The three tiers of Government should invest heavily on education because "if you educate one woman, you educate a nation"

Proper implementation of the Universal Basic Education scheme (UBE) should be carried out and the success of the programme should be ensured in order to eradicate illiteracy.

Employers of labour should be encouraged to give equal opportunity to all workers irrespective of gender. This will enhance advancement for both male and female workers.

Career talks should be organized at the secondary school level to enable the females realize their potentials at the early stage of their lives.

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