

Strengthening Gender equity in higher Education Leadership, empowering Women for Leadership Position



According to UNESCO, the global gender parity of undergraduate females to males is 1.08. Female numbers grew over sevenfold from 10.8 to 77.4 million in the past decades. The relatively high female enrolment rate is a mismatch to female leadership in HEIs and access into STEM subjects - with the exception of Sweden which had 43% female leaders by 2010. The range of female professors and female headed-institutions for many other countries ranged from 0-36%. Currently, 12.8% of 41 Ugandan universities are female-headed. There are only three female chancellors.

Contextually, gender equity in higher education leadership and women's empowerment is mandated by international, regional and national legal frameworks, ratified by most

governments. It is, therefore, a matter of compliance. The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Freedoms in 1948, the African Union Gender Policy (2009), and the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda (1995) provide a legal framework to **ensure gender balance and fair representation of marginalized groups on all constitutional and other bodies. The Gender in Education Policy (2009)** provides a framework for the implementation and monitoring of a gender sensitive and responsive education system at all levels of education as a fundamental human right. The policy further requires universities to address gender gaps, and mainstream strategies to address existing gender imbalances. **Africa's and Uganda's national legal frameworks and policies are in sync with global ones.**

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Why are there persistently fewer female leaders in HEIs in Africa and Uganda?

The barriers to gender equity in Africa and Uganda are historical in nature. Women's voices at policy levels and knowledge on gender issues were limited until the 1980s, as exemplified by the two cases: In Uganda, gender issue became a matter of national concern and for higher learning institutions (HEIs) from 1985, after the United Nations International Conference on Women in Nairobi. Uganda's women delegation from academics and non-governmental organizations came back determined to change the gender terrain of the country and Makerere University, then the only university in the country, was founded in 1922 as a technical institute with the motto **"Let us be men"**. It commenced with 14 pioneer, all-male students and four male staff. After two decades, the first set of six female students were admitted in the 1940s. The university motto later changed to **"We build for the future"**, which, to date, has stood the test of time.

Advocacy for gender equity was intensified from 1985 to date. Women lobbied and championed women's agenda. They created awareness amongst government entities, development partners, and the entire University. Subsequently, a department of Women Studies was created at Makerere University in 1991, headed by Professor Victoria Mwaka. Thereafter, Makerere University became a global leader in gender policy and there were other positive changes in the country's political

landscape, such as the high figure of 34% female parliamentarians.

At the 1990 UN-sponsored meeting in Thailand, five courageous African women Ministers of Education gathered: **Fay Chung** of Zimbabwe, **Vida Yeboah (RIP)** of Ghana, **Paulette Moussavo-Missambo** of Gabon, **Simone de Comarmond-Testa** of Seychelles, and **Alice Tiendrebeugo** of Burkina Faso decided to take action on the appalling state of girls' education in Africa. They established the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) (www.fawe.org) that is bridging gaps in girls' education in Africa via advocacy, awareness creation, training, education, scholarships, networking and partnerships, and developing leadership capacity of FAWE beneficiaries. So far, a network of women education ministers, permanent secretaries, women vice chancellors, FAWE alumni, African First Ladies and policy makers continue driving the education of girls and women in Africa. Over 55,000 girls and women have been educated by FAWE so far.

Multiple **socio-cultural barriers** inhibit the potential of women in accessing into higher education and ascending into leadership positions. To date, women are under-represented in the leadership of higher education sector. Cases of teenage pregnancies, early marriages, sexual abuse of the girl child, low importance attached to the education of the girl-child, poor school environment such as shared pit-latrines, lack of sanitary towels, low quality etc. contribute

to high school dropout rates. Additionally, most women are socialized in, “acceptable” behaviours for an African woman. Hence, their leadership potential remains under developed. Asked why women did not apply for the just-concluded 2017 Makerere University Vice Chancellor appointment process, Ms. Irene Ovungi, the Vice Chairperson, Makerere University Council, said this: “Women often are less confident, thanks to negative socialization, have fewer female role models, and fewer support systems/networks e.g. rotary club, etc. Women who don’t conform to stereotypes are often get penalized or sanctioned e.g. mocked, not respected, disliked, passed over for promotion, etc. So we learn to conform.” Dr. P. Iplulate (HOD) had this to say on why as at 2017 there is only one female college principal in Makerere University (out of 10): “We were intimidated by the male competitors, they spiced their by peddling lies about the **conditions** because a number of us are not very familiar with the laws and policies.”

Gender stereotyped behaviors, displayed by society and lack of support are disempowering women from pursuing their dreams even when they qualify. Those who dare to stand for leadership positions are eked out of competition because men often see power, influence and money rather than services. The tempered, all inclusive and participative leadership style employed by most women from my personal experience gets mocked, and women leaders are wrongly perceived as weaklings, attracting critical judgments and mockery. Very few women who see this negative treatment on fellow women can dare to be subjected to similar humiliation.

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The process for leadership career development in HEL of Uganda is structured, lengthy and merit-based. Once recruited, the next hurdle is in academic growth and development from Masters to PhD and post-doctoral level in an often unresourced environment (lack of funds, power, research equipment, infrastructure etc). Often, a Ugandan career woman must struggle to write research grants or exclusively pay their graduate education because government doesn’t finance graduate studies. Hence, more women drop out in their mid-academic career point compared to their male counterparts. Drop-outs can be due to financial, reproductive or social constraints. Some are easily discouraged from elective leadership positions due to the abrasive social stresses associated with campaigns. Where there isn’t strong family support, women face tough choices for either career development or raising family. Hence, academic career development for most women happens in a “pulse” manner contributing heavily to the “leaking pipe”.

The limited number of gender champions and role models discourage women from daring to take up leadership positions. Therefore, most women are found in lower paying, non-powerful mid and lower-level posts in universities.

Educating oneself on legal matters is an imperative to leadership. Affirmative policy reforms such as additional 1.5 points given to women at entry in Universities is still relevant in Uganda and other African countries given the odds hindering girls’ access in education. The numbers of girls entering into STEM education can be boosted through affirmative bridging courses. Gender-specific awards in Uganda, such as the Female Scholarship Initiative through Carnegie Cooperation, MasterCard, MTN, DAAD, Seed Global Health scholarships for needy students and staff are great opportunities for getting women the requisite qualifications. Adoption of the FAWE model on gender responsive pedagogy has proven effective in retaining girls in schools in 19 African countries and FAWE centers of excellence.

Leadership development and support system must be sustained: I benefitted from a series of International Women Leadership trainings since 2004 that broadened my local and international networks. To date, I enjoy varied peer support system in the networks of Vice Chancellors, rectors and others. My leadership glass ceiling happened in my early career, when my then Dean, Prof. Elly Katunguka, appointed me into headship. He identified my leadership capacity at a young age, encouraged me to carry on despite challenges. That single opportunity kicked off my potential. I have enjoyed the honor of establishing and heading institutions even under difficult circumstances. It is clearly necessary to make the leadership role more enjoyable and desirable; if managers are always expected to work late or on weekends it will dissuade women who perform other roles.

Target mid and lower-level management staff through their appointments and staff development schemes by defining quotas of scholarships for women. The multiplier effects of **Stepping up women’s access into higher education with prioritization of rural areas** would be enormous. For example, in one and half decades, Uganda’s enrollment trends of female students in higher education training institutions averaged 42.8% and 44.2% for all disciplines. However, access into STEM subjects remained within the range of 20-30%.

Funders should to support new upcountry universities like Muni University because this is where serious mobilization into education is required, through bridging courses. We should facilitate women, irrespective of age and class to achieve their desired dream of accessing higher education. This is because African women above forty years of age are likely to have grown-up children. Hence, they are likely to be focused and dependable students who give back to their society upon graduating.

Empower women through **targeted female scholarships including refugees**: Step up women’s leadership skills and knowledge advancements, strengthen advocacy and awareness, create women’s leadership clubs or colloquiums, set up mentor-mentee sessions to offer opportunities for women to network, connect with their peers share and encourage one another, and above all, build research management to enhance their professional competences.