

Gender Disparities in Decision Making Levels in Universities in Kenya

Walter Otieno K'odipo

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify reasons for disparities in gender representations at the decision making level at public universities in Kenya with specific reference to Moi University. The study utilized purposive sampling where 30 female members of the middle level staff population were invited to participate. Using an unstructured questionnaire and content analysis of documents obtained from administration offices, the study sought to assess the academic needs of middle level female staff; establish the challenges faced and establish whether there is an academic career development program for female staff to engage in matters of gender during promotions at the university. The study revealed that for women to make it to the decision making level of the university governance structure, they must strive to further their education.

Keywords: gender disparities, middle level staff, universities, career development

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Introduction

It is evident that higher education for female middle level members of staff has become an essential tool of growth and development in public universities. Institutions with higher skill levels among female middle level staff are better prepared to face challenges associated with good governance and leadership as well as gender equality. The objectives of this study were to assess the academic needs of middle level female staff at Moi University, establish the challenges faced by middle level female staff at the

University and also determine whether there are any academic career development programs for female staff to deal with matters of gender during promotions at the university.

In Kenyan universities, numbers of qualified women employees at the decision making levels remain low in compared to men. This situation can be demoralizing to female middle level staff who may feel marginalized if not well equipped academically to compete effectively with their male counterparts in the work place.

Literature Review

The marginalization of women in all spheres of life in Africa is not a recent phenomenon. However, it touches on social, economic and political life of the people of Africa. Amadiume (1987) argues that in pre-colonial society, sex and gender did not necessarily coincide. Examining the structures that enabled women to achieve power, she shows that roles were neither rigidly masculinized nor feminized. Economic changes in colonial times undermined women's status and reduced their political role and contributions. Amadiume maintains, patriarchal tendencies introduced by colonialism persist today, to the detriment of women.

[Melinda \(2006\)](#) argues that certain colonial practices, intentionally or unintentionally, decreased women's influence in the public sphere by undermining their traditional

bases of authority. In pre-colonial societies, women's authority stemmed from both their reproductive and productive roles. The colonial administration introduced cash crop agriculture and its preference for recruiting men to civil service posts during much of the colonial period undermined women's status. Other policies, however, explicitly sought to increase women's participation in public life.

All these elements of early marginalization found their way into public institutions of higher learning such as the universities long before end of colonial rule.

History shows that women in Africa have been confined to peripheral roles while men are elevated to the high spectrum of decision making. For the female middle level staff in higher education institutions, it is therefore an uphill task if one has to penetrate to the university's governance structure.

The irony is that the constitution of Kenya is gender responsive and articulates clearly that the right to education is not a privilege but a fundamental right. It is also clearly stated that in allocating resources, the State shall give priority to ensuring the widest possible enjoyment of the right or fundamental freedom having regard to prevailing circumstances, including the vulnerability of particular groups or individuals. These provisions are critical because the survival of any society depends, to a large extent, on the education of its people. The state is the central actor in any claim to the right to

education: It is the prime duty-bearer and the prime implementer. The state must therefore be judged or challenged on the right to education, whether this is in the constitution, the laws or policies (<http://www.right-to-education.org/country>). The leadership of educational institutions is therefore faced with the challenge and responsibility of ensuring that there is gender parity in these institutions.

The UN Secretary General in his keynote address on Monday, April 4th-5th, 2011, in the [final Report of the 5th Global Colloquium of University Presidents](#), titled “*Empowering*

Women to change the world: What Universities and UN can Do,” stated:

Women remain second-class citizens in too many countries, deprived of basic rights or legitimate opportunities, and he challenged the participants in the Colloquium to help in the fight to overcome discrimination and change perceptions about what women can and should do.

Manya, 2000 (in Morley, 2003:10) observes that ‘in Kenya the development and purpose of European universities was used as a model for those in Africa. African universities were established to nurture an African male elite who, even though they de facto were conceived as subordinate to European rulers, could relate well with the concerns of European colonial masters whose social structure of power was essentially patriarchal’.

Assié-Lumumba (2006) observed that women in higher education institutions have been consistently under-represented in teaching, research and academic administrative positions of high status. In addition to their small, and at times truly negligible, numbers, they tend to be clustered in the lower levels of the academic occupational ladder (Humm, 1996; Quina, Cotter and Romenesko, 1998; Eholié, 2007; Houphouët-Boigny and Koblavi Mansilla, 2007; Meena, 2007). Assié-Lumumba argued further that since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Fourth World Conference on Women, 15 September 1995, the concept of gender mainstreaming has been further popularized. The arguments about women's location in society have changed since the earlier version of integration and gender equality, and have proceeded to the articulation of women's unique ability with potential contributions to a mainstream widely dominated by men.

Some scholars have argued that the major problem in academia is power, rather than gender per se, and that what is needed to solve the gender problem is to actualize the democratization of the institution (Ronning, 2000). This perspective misses some important dimensions, especially when educational inequality is analyzed within the framework of dynamic historical processes. Inequality in academia cannot be considered gender-free. As will be argued later, even equal access does not translate into equality on every ground of education including output, outcome, and the value attached. There is in actuality perpetual mutation of the grounds of the application of *de facto* gender inequality (Assié-Lumumba, 2006, p. 5).

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The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) specifically stipulated in *Article 10* that 'parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure equal rights with men in the field of education and in particular to ensure [rights] on a basis of equality of men and women' (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 1995, p.29).

Women's rights to learning must be articulated at all levels simultaneously, highlighting the greater needs in higher education considering the accumulated gap. Women's limited presence in higher education is an infringement on their rights and has implications in terms of their limited contribution in knowledge production at all levels, the absence of their vision in policy formulation, and their negatively skewed distribution in the labor force with consequences for income distribution (Assié-Lumumba, 2006, p. 27).

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on structural functional theory which states that; different institutions and structures in a society form a function like part of a social machine. Herbert Spencer recognized three functional needs or prerequisites that produce

selection pressures: they are regulatory, operative (production) and distributive. He argued that all societies need to solve problems of control and [coordination](#), production of goods, [services](#) and [ideas](#), and, finally, to find ways of distributing these resources.

The solution, as Herbert Spencer sees it, is to differentiate structures to fulfill more specialized functions; thus a chief or "big man" emerges, soon followed by a group of lieutenants, and later kings and administrators. The structural parts of society (ex. families, work) function interdependently to help society function. Therefore, social structures work together to preserve society.

Spencer coined the term "[survival of the fittest](#)" in discussing the simple fact that small tribes or societies tend to be defeated or conquered by larger ones. Of course, many sociologists still use him (knowingly or otherwise) in their analyses, especially due to the recent re-emergence of evolutionary theory (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Structural_functionalism).

The allegory by Spencer, 'survival for the fittest' can easily be misused by those in governance positions bent on marginalizing women. The best way to ensure that women functions in our organizations are protected is to ensure that equity is observed at all times during recruitments and promotions. The idea of survival for the fittest can only help men to climb up the ladder in the organizational structure since they have more time than women who must balance work and family engagements.

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In this respect, the Moi university governance structure must function in such a manner that no gender feels discriminated for whatever reasons. The onus is on the Council to ensure that more female middle level staff are included in the decision making organs especially those with higher levels of education. This would in turn avert tendency to discrimination and other forms of marginalization and hence productivity at work shall surely be realized.

The structural-functional theory was essential in the understanding of the position of female middle level staff in the university hierarchy. Moi University female middle level staff is an important cog in the wheel of the university's administrative and academic operations. In their places of work, they do well in terms of performances just like their male counterparts. This cadre of staff is operationally situated between the senior and junior level cadres hence their being vital cog in the administrative structure of the university. If the centre is weak, the whole body of a system can collapse. They cannot be ignored but rather should be assisted to rise through rank and file. They help the institution achieve successes in their core businesses which are teaching and research. The graduates that pass through their hands each year upon graduation provide the critical mass for human resource needs locally and internationally.

Methodology

This research was based on qualitative research methodology that helps us understand the need of supporting education for Moi University female middle level staff which intern would prepare them to be part of the decision making. Qualitative research expands the range of knowledge and understanding of the world beyond the researchers themselves. It often helps us see why something is the way it is, rather than just presenting a phenomenon.

Data collection was done using interview schedule and their responses were recorded. I interviewed the respondents who were purposively selected to get their experiences about the desire to further their education. It's not the policy of the university to marginalize any section of staff in terms of gender, but this might have inadvertently happened especially at decision making levels. I visited departments at the university and interviewed some female members of staff to get their perspective. There were no ethical issues observed during the course of interview. Indeed information was generated without any suspicion from the respondents.

I applied and obtained permission to conduct the research from the relevant administration personnel. All participants signed a consent form that explained the objectives of the research. They were assured confidentiality and anonymity. The study was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time without penalty.

Data Analysis and Results

I coded the results and clustered the responses in thematic manner. The themes were centered on experiences working at the university, funding for the courses, promotion; and suggestions for improvement.

Experiences working at Moi University: Although some female middle level staff interviewed found their work fulfilling, they also indicated that there was a lot of bureaucratic red tape when it came to promotion. This was well summarized by a participant who said: *"I have worked for five years without a chance to advance career because of work being inflexible"*. Another one added: *"I have worked in the same office for more than ten years without transfer"*. One participant shared that *"the work has been challenging due to bureaucratic processes that allow decisions to be made after a long time"*.

Funding for the Courses: A good number of female staff indicated that they received sponsorship to further their education from the institution. This could be in the form of partial tuition payment or staff development funds. For the most part, most of them pursued higher learning by obtaining government or cooperative society loans. Others used their own savings or borrowed money from family members.

Promotion and/or Salary Increment: Some female staff received a salary increment after they obtained a higher level of education. One participant was given a two yearly increment after she published a journal article and presented a paper at an international

conference. Another participant was promoted to a middle level position after graduation with a diploma certificate. However, the promotion was not instant even after the certificates were deposited to the relevant bodies. It took one participant seven years to get her promotion and another five years.

Suggestions for improvement: Those interviewed felt that the institution was not doing enough to recognize those who had achieved higher education since hiring. There was no scheme of service to help them get into a higher grade automatically after obtaining the required credentials and this made them think that promotion was not on merit. These sentiments were summarized by a participant who said: *“People should be promoted and placed in the right place once they attain higher certificates. Hard work should be recognized and its benefits should be enjoyed by the university”*. There were also feelings that when positions became available, the institution was not auditing the available skills appropriately before advertising to the general public. Hence, the low rate of promotion even after attaining new levels of education. This sentiment was expressed by a participant who said: *“Do not employ external candidates when those in the system can adequately provide the same service, recognize your own and make them proud to be of service to the system”*.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study was designed to investigate how academically prepared the female middle level staff are for promotion to decision making levels at the university. During data analysis, a few themes emerged: a) low level of education at entry level, b) professional development opportunities, c) stagnation due to bureaucracy, e) lack of clear criteria for promotion, f) minimal financial support to further education g), and balancing work and home life.

Steady (2002) has eloquently articulated the historical foundation of the marginalization of African women in the institutions of higher learning as a colonial legacy. We can say that the low entry level of women to the university jobs is not a recent phenomenon. Most of these female staff did not enter the university with what could be termed low academic achievement because they liked to be that way, but rather because of marginalization women have suffered over time. The University has the chance to correct this by empowering the female middle level staff.

Most staff interviewed agreed that the University provides staff development funds and that it is one of the best institutions to work in. They also identified challenges such as the monotony of working in same offices for years, unclear procedures on promotions due to bureaucratic processes and at times nepotism. Majority felt that career progression through promotion is never guaranteed.

Way Forward

Though this study was carried out in one institution in Kenya, I strongly feel that the scenario is common. I therefore recommend that tertiary institutions in Kenya should:

- a) Provide opportunities for female middle level staff to train in fields where women traditionally have been underrepresented at the university.
- b) Set up [Career Development Grants for female](#) middle level staffs who qualify for post graduate studies in areas related to their work.
- c) Encourage the middle level staff to carry out action oriented research with a focus of improving services in the university.

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