PERCEPTION OF FEMALE LEADERS IN HIGHER INSTITUTIONS OF LEARNING IN EKITI STATE

Evelyn Tolulope Akinwale
c/o Dept. of Media and Communication Language Arts, Afe Babalola University, Ado Ekiti
E-mail Address: efalyn1@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
To scholars, women in leadership positions have been stereotyped to be unfit and inexperienced to occupy traditional leadership positions unlike their male counterparts. A fundamental challenge to women's leadership arises from the mismatch between the qualities traditionally associated with leaders and those traditionally associated with women in general. Women in leadership positions are not treated equally with men in leadership positions (Nick, 2007; Sayu, 2012). However, this research reveals the perception of Ekiti state female leaders in Higher Institutions on their leadership positions. Through interviews with selected female leaders in three higher institutions of learning, questions delved into how these female leaders see themselves in the line of their duties. The study tends to feel the pulse of female leaders about the leadership positions they are occupying since the impression they have about themselves matters a lot before considering other people's perception about them.

The study adopts quantitative methodology and gathered its data directly from personal interview as well as the use of questionnaire for its survey. Findings indicate that Nigerian Institutions of Higher Learning are increasingly becoming forerunners in gender sensitivity. Female Leaders admitted that they were given equal chances of leading their units and their rights were not denied them in their professions. However, there are few instances where their male counterparts, though subtly, discriminate against the female leaders and prove uncooperative probably, due to cultural background and beliefs in Nigeria which are still in favour of male leaders. The paper concludes that female leaders, through merit, stand an equal chance of being elected and selected leaders in an academic environment. The findings nullified the fears of women with academic excellence seeking leadership positions and suggested ways by which equity in leadership positions can be encouraged.
Introduction

Leaders are simply defined as people who have the ability to influence the lives, thinking, ideas and aspirations of others. They direct, guide and inspire others around them in order to achieve defined goals or objectives. Defining the word ‘leadership’ is a difficult task as numerous definitions and descriptions have been given at various times by many scholars.

Hagher (2012) describes leadership as the ability to motivate the followers to a new way of thinking and some actions. He further stated that a good leader must have a destination to which the followers are ready to follow him or her. Leadership can also be defined as the ability to have an effect on the way someone or something develops, behaves, thinks or understand situations and issues without directly forcing or commanding them.

A leader can also be defined as someone who selects, equips, trains, and influences one or more follower(s) who have diverse gifts, abilities, and skills and focuses the follower(s) to the organization’s mission and objectives causing the follower(s) to willingly and enthusiastically expend spiritual, emotional, and physical energy in a concerted coordinated effort to achieve the organizational mission and objectives. (Winston & Patterson, 2003: pg 3)

Munroe (2005) however believes that leadership is more than just influence. He defined leadership as the capacity to influence others through inspiration motivated by a passion, generated by a vision, produced by conviction, and ignited by a purpose.

From another perspective, Hagher (2002) describes leadership as an activity which is needed to drive the engine of the world by empowering individuals, families, organisations, communities, countries and the world.

In spite of diverse and confusing definitions, leadership can simply be put to be ‘a process of influence’. It is about influencing others, though the influence may be good or bad which therefore reveals that leadership may be good or bad. Ewelu (1999: pg 44) further corroborates the fact that there can be effective or ineffective leadership when he states that leadership (when it is effective) holds the citizens of a social group or members of any group together, energies them and pulls them towards a definite end. Achieving effectiveness as a leader leads us to the qualities or traits expected of a typical person who want to lead others to achieve a goal.

There are varying characteristics of a true leader among which are vision, wisdom, positive attitude, courage, responsibility, humility, good self image, sense of humour, resilience, track record, initiative self discipline, creativity, etc.

Some key leadership traits can be characterized as follows: (a) continuous learning and teach ability. (b) service -oriented (c ) belief in other people and encouraging team work (d) positive energy towards responsibilities ( e ) leading balanced life (f)synergistic. (Covey, 1992:33).

LEADERSHIP FROM GENDER PERSPECTIVE

Gender equality remains a benchmark for the measurement of institutional and national advancement and the vanguard for engineering positive societal change and transformation. Gender responsiveness has remained relevant in the assessment of a nation’s human development index. In Africa, education, as a key instrument of human and societal advancement, has the mandate to offer direction and shape societal values to further enhance the quality of life of women and men in the society. Likewise, it is expected of leadership in tertiary institutions to set the pace in the advancement of equality and equity between genders.

Gender issues have evolved over the years from different angles all over the world, from education, politics, business and entrepreneur to mention but a few. Researchers across the globe states that gender equality has remained intractable even though national and international organizations are contributing significantly in ensuring equal representation. The assertive, authoritative and dominant behaviours that people link with leadership tend not to be viewed as attractive in women. (Dominici, Busch- Vishniac, Landau, Jarosz, Stokes, Gillian, Lebo (2008).

Although attitudes toward women as a group are generally positive, even more positive than attitudes toward men, these views do not hold for women who occupy traditionally male roles, especially when they excel in those roles. When women achieve in distinctly male arenas, they are seen as competent but are less well liked than equally successful men. By the same token, when women performing traditionally male roles are seen as nice, they are liked but not respected. (Sayu, 2012: pg 2)

Most of these misconceptions trailed women leaders in which women themselves find it hard to conceptualize their importance in the workplace environment. (Dominici et al, 2008) further revealed that women are more likely than men to possess the leadership qualities that are associated with success. That is, women are more transformational than men - they care more about developing their followers, they listen to them and stimulate them to think “outside the box,” they are more inspirational, and they are more ethical. The image of a leader is ‘male,’ and so we more often select or promote men (Sayu, 2012, pg 15). Nevertheless, Bass (2010:12 ) predicts that in the future women leaders will dominate simply because they are better suited to 21st century leadership/management than men.

Leadership has always been attributed to masculinity in Africa and the traditional notion that men make better leaders than women is still a belief. If developed nations can have women in leadership positions facing gender inequality issues, how much of stereotypes about women leaders can a developing nation like Nigeria have? Attaining gender equality and equity in Nigeria where beliefs in traditions and cultural heritages and values still prevail would be an arduous task. In Nigeria, despite laudable programmes put in place through participatory approach to ensure that the status of the Nigerian women
is enhanced and equal representation is accorded them, there were still gaps and obstacles in the realization of gender equality and women empowerment. (Onwenu, 2013).

However, the academic sector has recorded a slight improvement in gender equity. Ugwu, (2006: pg 10) posits that higher institutions of learning are traditionally viewed as centre of free thought, change and human development. This implied that the educational institutions should be enlightened enough to see beyond gender stereotypes and work together in harmony as one entity whenever a male or female is occupying a leadership position.

Literatures on leadership in higher educational institutions generally reveal that women are less likely than men to participate in higher administration (Ugwu, 2013: pg 11), mainly due to men’s discriminating against female leaders. The men prefer to have females as their assistants or subordinates and frown at women calling the shots.

THE ARGUMENT/PROBLEM

It is an established argument over the years through series of researches that women are predominantly castigated in their leadership positions as too soft or too harsh. Some are of the opinion that women leaders more often than not face higher standards than male leaders and are rewarded with less compensation. (Nick, 2007; Sayu, 2012).

It is somewhat believed that women in leadership positions must work doubly hard to achieve the same level of recognition as male leaders for the same level of work to prove they can lead. Also, when women exhibit traditionally valued leadership behaviours such as assertiveness, they tend to be seen as competent but not personable or well-liked. Yet when they adopt a more feminine style they are liked but not seen as having valued leadership skills.

Hence, for a cursory look, this paper seeks to find out the perception of female leaders towards their leadership positions in tertiary institutions in Ekiti State. The institutions selected are Afe Babalola University, Ado Ekiti (ABUAD); Ekiti State University, Ado Ekiti (EKSU); and Federal Polytechnic, Ado-Ekiti; and College of Education, Ikere-Ekiti.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS: Two specific questions were posed for this study:

(a) How do women leaders perceive their leadership positions?

(b) What are the perceptions of other people towards their leadership positions?

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts the descriptive research design by employing Personal Interview and Survey, with the use of questionnaire items. The study uses stratified random sampling method. Twenty (20) women in leadership positions in educational higher institutions of learning were interviewed while one hundred (100) copies of the questionnaire were distributed to women in leadership positions within Ekiti State. Each of the higher institutions of learning represent various academic cadre in that the first is a private university, the second is a state university, the third is a federal polytechnic and the last is a state College of Education. Female leaders in these institutions were randomly selected for this study for equal representation in the state.

The study adopts the qualitative method of data analysis using simple percentages and states the interview responses in line with the percentages. Eighteen (18) women leaders eventually responded to the interview while 94 questionnaire respondents were used for the findings.

The Instruments

An eight (8) item interview guide was designed to elicit information from the women leaders while a 12-item questionnaire was used to reveal their perceptions on the leadership roles they are occupying. The questionnaire sought to know if the leaders are performing their duties without any form of interference, either from male or female colleagues and how they are managing their subordinates.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

RQ 1: How do female leaders perceive their leadership positions?

To find answers to this research question, the respondents were asked to answer a group of related carefully framed questions. The responses were analysed using simple percentages and inferential statistic.

Summary of findings

- 15.9% disagree to remaining a subordinate instead of being a leader
- 81.9% believe that women make better leaders than men
- 89.4% can work conveniently in a male dominated environment without intimidations.
- 87.2% are fearless to contribute at management meetings full of male colleagues
- 74.5% believe that leadership and management are easier for female leaders than for male leaders
- 99% have the capacity to combine their leadership roles with other feminine duties
• 45.7% feel insecure in their office as a leader
• 96.8% believe that women leaders can perform well in all sectors.

Since 78 (81.9%) of the respondents believed that women can be better leaders than men and just 15 (15.9%) prefer to remain a subordinate than lead, it is a clear indication that women leaders are justifiably capable of holding leadership positions. Of all the respondents, 53 (56.4%) strongly believed while 40 (42.6%) also believed that they can combine their leadership roles with other feminine duties. This proves that like their men counterparts, women leaders are capable of managing every facet of their lives without one disturbing the other. The fact above further explains that there should be no inhibitions for organizations appointing female leaders just because they perceive them to be weaker in nature than men.

To further prove that they are not weak in any sense of the word, 58 (61.7%) and 33 (35.1%) strongly believed and believed respectively that female leaders can function in every endeavors of life and they will perform equally good or even better than their male colleagues.

The interview responses from Eighteen (18) interviewees supported the above findings as well. The interview responses show that all the respondents had one position in which they were holding or assigned to, most of which were appointed by merit and promotion. Majority of the respondents have been coping in their leadership role, though stressful in leading men who are subordinates. It has been discovered that women leaders are strong, determined, dedicated and most times, use their motherly instincts to relate with others at work. It also revealed that there are equal access and opportunities for male and female staff in higher institutions of learning in the same establishment.

On women’s perception towards their leadership positions, the interview revealed that most of them believed in themselves because apart from the motherly instincts which worked for them in the course of delivering their duties, they believed women are more meticulous and thorough in handling their duties. It shows that women are better managers than men. There are indications also that some women leaders exhibiting wickedness and toughness do so in order to show themselves as strong and determined in decision making, like their male colleagues. Most of these women also put up a hard face because of the men who want to override them in office.

In summary, it can be concluded that women have the right attitude and perceptions about their leadership positions and their male counterparts are more than averagely, giving them the chance to work without threat and prejudice.

RQ 2: What are the perceptions of other people towards their leadership positions?

• 96.8% are fulfilling their leadership roles without fear nor favour from their male counterparts
• 24.4% agreed that men are intimidating them on their duty post while 72% disagreed to the fact that men are intimidating them at work.
• 73.4% believed that men are doing everything possible to frustrate them out of their leadership positions
• 70.3% are of the opinion that organisations are not comfortable having female leaders heading the overall workforce.

Findings revealed that 69 (73.4%) of the sampled respondents strongly agreed that they are fulfilling their leadership roles without any fear or favour from their male counterpart while 22 (23.4%) likewise agreed to that fact. This is an indication that there is equal opportunity for both male and female leaders in the academic environment. When asked if men are intimidating them in their duty post, 36 (38.0%) strongly disagreed and 32 (34.0%) disagreed. It therefore implies that the Nigerian Institutions of learning are increasingly becoming pacesetters in gender sensitivity and allowing equal playing ground of intellectual freedom in these schools. Fifty eight, 58 (61.7%) of women leaders admitted that they deserve the positions and their rights were not denied them in the elections that brought them to the positions.

However, there were indications that some of the interviewees have problems coping with their male colleagues because the men believed that they are superior to women. The obstacles faced by these women leaders in the course of delivering their duties differ from each respondent. The findings revealed that some men still, though subtly, discriminate against female leaders and thereby prove uncooperative if they are under a female leader. It was also noted through findings that the cultural background and beliefs in this part of the world still favour more men than women, so the ratio of women leaders to men is still low.

CONCLUSION

This study was undertaken to ascertain if female leaders are having equal opportunities to lead like their male counterparts in higher institutions of learning. With the selected schools representing institutions in Ekiti state, it was convincingly discovered, that there is a level of equality and fairplay in leadership positions in the educational sector. This kind of research is however, recommended for other states of the federation not only in the educational sector but in all institutions.

Findings show that Nigerian society still discriminates against women in leadership positions but the trend has reduced considerably in Higher Institutions of Learning probably because they are expected to be the intellectual forces setting the pace in every society. It also shows that men and women in higher institutions of learning have equal chances of being selected and elected into leadership positions. On the whole, there is a fair distribution of gender representation in Higher Institutions of Learning in Ekiti State, Nigeria.
REFERENCES


Table 1: Respondents’ perception on their leadership positions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>I can’t say</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I wish to remain a subordinate than a leader</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>45.7%</td>
<td>38.3%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women make better leaders than men</td>
<td>44.7%</td>
<td>37.2%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can work in a male dominated environment without intimidations</td>
<td>44.7%</td>
<td>44.7%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am fearless at management meetings full of other colleagues</td>
<td>45.7%</td>
<td>41.5%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>100%</td>
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<tr>
<td>I have the capacity to combine my leadership role with other feminine duties</td>
<td>56.4%</td>
<td>42.6%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management and leadership are easier for female leaders</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel secure in my office as a leader</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>36.2%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe we can have female leaders occupying any sector and performing equally well as male leaders</td>
<td>61.7%</td>
<td>35.1%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Respondents’ perception of other people’s opinion on their Leadership positions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Questions</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>I can’t Say</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am fulfilling my leadership roles without fear nor favour</td>
<td>73.4%</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Men are intimidating me on my duty post</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men are doing everything possible to frustrate women out of leadership positions</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>40.4%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisations are not comfortable having female leaders</td>
<td>30.9%</td>
<td>39.4%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>100%</td>
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