Gender Communication: African Universities and the Empowerment of Women for Leadership

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Abstract

The history of missing, invisible, marginalised and violated women is long in Africa including Nigeria. However, there is no country in the world where women have achieved full equality, thus this paper examines gender issues through gender communication as well as gender disparities in higher education. In addition, the paper examines Africa, gender gaps and the role of universities in narrowing these gaps. Specific recommendations are made in the area of facilitating women's growth and equality as well as creating awareness that promotes young women academics on a more sustainable basis.

Keywords: Gender Communication; Marginalisation; Discrimination; Empowerment; and Leadership.

1. Introduction

The history of missing, invisible, marginalised and violated women is long in Africa including Nigeria. Scholars, women's rights activists, human rights campaigners have over the years called attention to the problems that face women which tend to erase their lives and experiences. The case of abducted school girls in Chibok, Borno State, Nigeria in the wake of the ravages caused by the Boko Haram sect tells the story in a more glaring way. It appears that violence has the strongest impact in making women invisible. Yarhere and Soola (2008) citing United Nations documents identify forms of violence against women as both physical and psychological. These can take the form of wife battery, female circumcision, rape, maltreatment, exposure to fatal diseases, forced abortion, and body scarification. Others are threat to the use of force, verbal assaults, harassment, slavery/bondage, discrimination, harmful traditional practices, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced pornography, and other forms of human degradation. Several factors account for the violence that women experience. These can be linked, as Yarhere and Soola (2008) and Ekpo (2012) see them, to; institutionalised role of power, religion, portrayal of women, government as sources of violations of women's rights, traditional and cultural practices and socio-political/economic discriminations.

The dire situations of the women in Third World countries particularly on the Asian, South American and African continents have elicited calls for redressing the wrongs, reversing the marginalisation of women and empowering women through education, esteem building, efficacy regimes, social inclusion, political participation, employment and leadership. The need to address these problems all over the world is captured in Unesco's (1981) summation that equal rights for women and full participation for women in all spheres of social life are necessary for an all-encompassing development of a nation, the welfare of the world, and the cause of peace. Unesco that, "of all the violations of human rights, the most systematic, widespread and entrenched is the denial of equal to women" (p.189) and specifies some of the problems to include:

- Women tend to be confined to a subordinate part in public life though a few have excelled as politic academics, professionals and entrepreneurs.
- Women's access to education, social participation and communication is impeded by traditions, prejudices instigated sometimes by social customs and religion, and discriminatory laws.
- Women are treated as a minority group, disadvantaged, and powerless whereas they make up half of the population.
- Women bear the brunt of poverty, unemployment and illiteracy more than men.
- Women are not given sufficient opportunity to achieve economic independence, social security and a proper consciousness of their own value.
- Women still find it tough in gaining acceptance for elective political posts while men continue to dominate in political parties, trade unions, institutions and businesses.
- Public attitudes pertaining to the role of women in society mainly determine decisions on the status of women. Whereas the media exert powerful influences on these attitudes, they hardly portray women as major contributors to work, careers, and public life.

In the light of Unesco's (1981) observation that there is no country in the world where women have achieved full equality, we shall in the next section examine the literature concerning gender in-equality outside of Africa.

2. Gender Communication

We get to know about gender issues through gender communication and researches. This section highlights those issues and makes the subject more understandable. In a discourse on popular conservatism and the neoliberal maternal in contemporary British culture, Littler (2013) configures the yummy-mummy i.e. "the mother who has been encoded as a subject responding to the individualistic pressures of contemporary society not by seeking equality in work and childcare provision, but rather by becoming an infantilised and sexually desired subject seeking an upwardly mobile domestic retreatist romance." Above all, her orientation is insular. It is a form of popular disempowered feminisation articulated to upper-class aspirationalism. Littler's analysis of this new social type of women in the British culture marks a major cultural shift and is at the same time produced by increasing economic inequalities and was drawn from a range of sources, particularly celebrity guidebooks and novels.

Elsewhere in Israel, Lachover (2013) examined feminist discourse in women's business magazine noting that, "opening the local economy to the global market and neoliberalism brought with it the inclusion and advancement of women in the Israeli labour market" (p.123). The author adds that there has been a constant rise in the proportion of women in the work force to about 51.3%, that this growing entrance of Israeli women into the work force has helped some to advance, develop a career in law, communications, medicine, high tech, and the capital market propelled by legal enactments which promote the ethos of meritocracy and supportive of every individual regardless of gender, an equal opportunity establishing the status of a working woman as an employee deserving of recognition and compensation that resonates with her skill, training and effort.

In the United States, Waymer (2014) analysed gender-based differences in the undergraduate Public Relations writing classes and found out that more females serve as faculty advisors for Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) chapters than their male counterparts. They also found out that more females teach PR writing classes than do males with implications for tenure and promotion expectations for PR faculty members. Waymer states that this finding aligns with decades of research on gender and gender disparity by PR scholars which saw that females in PR tend to disproportionately enact the technician role, as opposed to the manager's role, which is usually enacted by males.

In a related study, Volz and Lee (2013) focused on gender disparities among Pulitzer Prize winners between 1917 and 2010. Involving 814 female and male winners, the study borrowed from the compensation model and showed that female winners were more likely to have a metropolitan upbringing, journalism major, and a graduate degree. They added that these differences manifested the logic of compensation: some forms of social capital can be important for female journalists to overcome gender disadvantage in competing for recognition. Their conclusion is that though there has been some historical improvement in the extent to which women journalists have been capable of winning the Pulitzer Prize, the gender gap has yet to disappear.

Similarly, Harp, Bachmann and Loke (2014) while examining the presence of female columnists in U.S. opinion pages found support for empirical and anecdotal evidence showing that the news media are male-dominated. Their study updated the extant literature on women's representation in the opinion pages of ten U.S. newspapers and showed that female authors are moving beyond topics traditionally linked to females and are writing columns on politics and economy. The researchers concluded that these women remain a minority meaning that women's voices have yet to gain more visibility in opinion writing in U.S. journalism.

In Australia, North (2015) investigated the currency of gender by looking at student and institutional responses to the first gender unit in an Australian journalism programme. The report dealt with the gendered nature of both news content and production processes. Such a unit helps to address entrenched industry bias, the core content, and student/institutional responses. North concludes that the on-going gender stratification in decision-making roles in news organisation in Australia, addressing inequity, and flow-on effect into gendered news content is best done with better education of new generation journalists.

In the area of sports, Brown, Billings, Mastro and Brown-Devlin (2015) studied the impact of race and gender on sports-related transgressions and noted that, "women's sports coverage is dominated by narratives devaluing, marginalising, and objectifying both women athletes and athleticism" (p.491). Women athletes are described under the confines of gendered notions of femininity, and deviations from these norms greeted with disdain and criticism.

Concerning politics, Meeks (2013) in, how the *New York Times* covered Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin in 2008, observed that the *Times*, "focused greater attention on their norm-breaking identities while providing more substantive issue and trait coverage for the men" (p.534) and concluded that this trend may have more firmly established the men as political contenders by emphasising their policy positions and character, while casting women as a poor fit for office by focusing more on their ground-breaking gender. Meeks sees journalism and politics as prioritising gendered domains similarly. In journalism, feminine news topics are said to be published in less visible spaces whereas masculine news topics are generally considered "hard news" and fitting for the front page. In politics, masculine issues are said to be more important to voters than feminine issues especially as candidates run for national executive offices.

The preceding review has demonstrated that the media do focus on gender disparities in our different

societies. It also reflects the fact that gender inequities are also prevalent in the media. Again, it is possible to see that just as we can learn considerably about gender issues in the media, the media themselves can be a powerful means in the effort to address gender imbalances at work, at home, in institutions of learning, in organisations and the society at large.

3.   Gender Disparities and Higher Education

Apart from the media, institutions of higher learning also constitute a prominent sector in which gender disparities become glaring. In this section, we shall examine the gender situation with particular reference to what interventions higher institutions especially in Africa undertake to empower women, reverse their marginalisation and make them more visible and efficacious.

In a study focusing on an educational intervention designed to increase women's leadership self-efficacy; Isaac, Kaatz, Lee and Carnes (2012) note that women are sparsely represented in leadership in academic Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Medicine (STEMM). Isaac *et al.*, add that cultural stereotypes about men, women and leaders influence the attitudes, judgments and decisions that others make about women and the choices women make for themselves. They call for multilevel interventions to counteract the impact of these persuasive and early activated stereotypes which constrain women's entry, persistence and advancement in academic STEMM. Describing an individual-level educational intervention, using the trans-theoretical model of behaviour change as framework, the researchers assessed the success of a semester course on increasing women's leadership self-efficacy. Results indicated increasing leadership self-efficacy as course participants applied course information and integrated strategies to mitigate the impact of societal stereotypes on own leadership practices. Their conclusion was that providing strategies (such as consciousness raising, dramatic relief, environmental re-evaluation, self-revaluation, self-liberation, social liberation, contingency reinforcement management, helping relationships, counter conditioning and stimulus control) is effective in increasing leadership self-efficacy in women at early stages of academic STEMM careers.

Also, Grey-Bowen and McFarlane (2010) looking at gender compensation discrimination, gender compensation gap and the link with higher education in the U.S., note that higher educational institutions are part of the terrain in which gender compensation, discrimination and the general compensation gap exist to create the perception and reality of inequality between men and women. They cite Bobbitt-Zeher as stating that, "the majority of women continue to choose majors such as education, social sciences, humanities and art that lead to lower wages over the course of their careers. Thus, the gender pay gap is also facilitated by women's natural choices as to career ambitions and options" (p.76). They urge women to empower themselves and improve their skills by:

a.   Asserting their equal status as individuals.
b.   Claiming equality with men in all industries and institutions.
c.   Educating themselves through all available avenues and opportunities for actualisation.
d.   Make use of seminars, workshops and available resources to direct attention to unfair treatment women receive in organisations.
e.   Apply for positions that have more responsibilities and power and hence command higher salaries.
f.   Hire, promote and mentor other women to become leaders and managers.
g.   Become entrepreneurs and establish themselves as independent thinkers and leaders.

Very significantly, Morley (2013) in a stimulus paper on women and higher education leadership and citing some Unesco and other data states as follows:

- The ratio of female-to-male enrolment in higher education (HE) is now 1:08 meaning that there are slightly more women undergraduates than men enrolled worldwide.
- Globally, the number of female students went up six fold from 10.8 to 77.4 million between 1970 and 2008.
- High rates of women's participation in HE have yet to translate into proportional representation in the labour market or access to leadership and decision making positions.
- A global gender gap remains in senior higher education leadership
- Throughout the 27 countries of the EU, 13% of all institutions in the higher education sector and 9% of universities awarding Ph.D. degrees were headed by women. The highest shares of female rectors (Vice Chancellors) were recorded in Sweden, Iceland, Norway, Poland and Israel. Denmark, Cyprus, Lithuania, Luxembourg and Hungary had no female university head by 2009.
- The under-representation of women in higher education leadership reflects not only continued inequalities between men and women, but missed opportunities for women to contribute to the future development of Universities.
- In UK, in 2009/2010 women were 44% of all academics. A higher proportion of staff in professional roles was male (80.8%) than female (19.1%). Men comprised 55.7% of academic staff in non-manager roles and 72.0% of academic staff in senior management roles.

- Women's absence from senior leadership is a recurrent theme in studies in the global north. It has also emerged as a theme in the global south in the past 20 years including Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Africa and Sri Lanka. Lack of women in senior positions mean women are globally under-represented across all decision-making fora including committees, boards, recruitment panels and the executive (Morley, 2013, p.3)
- To help address gender inequality in higher education leadership, Morley (2013) suggests three levels of change interventions:
  - (i)   Those targeted at women to enhance their confidence and self-esteem, empowerment, capacity building, encouraging competition, assertiveness and risk taking.
  - (ii)   Those aimed at organisations to include gender mainstreaming, institutional transformation e.g. gender equality policies, process and practices, challenging discriminatory structures, gender impact assessments, audits/reviews and introducing work/life balance schemes.
  - (iii) Those directed at knowledge such as identification of bias, curriculum change.

Also, within the framework of promoting female participation in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, the OECD Programme (2014) to further foster equity in higher education scripted a compendium of practical cases involving Australia, Belgium, Finland, Poland, Spain, Sweden and United Kingdom. Some of the initiatives have included higher education loan programme, promotion of enrolment of girls in STEM programmes, role modeling, mentoring of young researchers, taking actions toward gender segregation, blurring gender discrepancy, technology fora that attract more women, promotion of gender balance, fostering women's participation in scientific programmes and careers through grants and scholarships, establishment of gender equality plans and observatories, organisation of girls' day, gender equality week and visibilisation of women in science. Others include promotion of teaching and research in women and gender equality, increasing the number of female professors through funding and investment in improving leadership, governance, and management in the higher education sector.

4. Africa, Gender Gaps and the Role of Universities

Gender inequalities appear to be more acute in Africa. In a study on gender representation in communication education and practice in Nigeria, Ashong and Batta (2011) noted that women (60.09%) outnumber men (39.91%) as students of communication studies in Nigeria, that men (78.65%) and not women (21.35%) form the bulk of communication faculty in Nigeria and that men significantly outnumber women in all facets of communication practice – Journalism (68%), Editors (77.84%), Public Relations (60%), Newspaper owners (88.81%), and Advertising Practitioners (82.54%).

Looking at the subject matter more broadly from the point of view of Africa, Masanja (2010) states that sub-Saharan African countries' education statistics reveal that women continue to lag behind in general and specifically in Science, Mathematics and Technology (SMT) education which is confronted by challenges of participation, equity, exclusion, quality and relevance, resources and expertise.

Masanja further notes that gender mainstreaming as demonstrated by the University of Dar es Salaam was a potent initiative to increase women's participation in Science, Mathematics and Technology education and employment in Africa. Gender mainstreaming, a policy intervention promoted in the EU Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) and in the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) is, "a strategy that makes women's and men's experiences an integral dimension in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes" (Morley, 2013 citing Tiessen (2007). At the Norwegian University of Science and Technology it is reported that the following gender equality interventions led to 55% increase in the number of women professors in 5 years (up from 9% to 14%) and parity in the number of males and females recruited: gender analysis, gender policy development, opportunities of equality advisors, management appointed equality issues committee, budgetary allocation for equal opportunity, quotas for recruitment, qualification stipend, mentoring for female Ph.D. fellows, post-doctoral staff and associate professors. Others are networking, stimulus package for women in male-dominated fields, career planning support for women, support for women entering higher education management.

At the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in Africa, Masanja (2010) outlines the following specific programmes:

- Gender sensitisation and raising gender awareness to increase the proportion of gender-sensitive men and women students and staff.
- Establishment of an undergraduate scholarship programme.
- Establishment of affirmative action to increase access and performance of women in mathematics, science and technology education.
- Establishment of early-childhood centre facility.
- Revising and enacting policies and laws to address gender concerns such as gender-based violence, inequalities in opportunities and benefits.

Writing on a similar subject on female participation in African Universities, Nawe (undated) emphasised effective

strategies for enhancing participation particularly in the University of Dar es Salaam. She speaks on strategies that redress gender imbalance similar to the ones embarked upon at European institutions, strategies for enhancing female access to higher education as well as strategies for enhancing female participation.

In a similar view, Onsongo (2011) writes on the intervention in some public universities in Kenya aimed at promoting gender equity in higher education. She observes that, "analysis of students' enrolment in four selected public universities in selected courses confirmed that women are not enrolled in courses like science and especially engineering. Disparities are also reflected in the recruitment and promotion of academic staff and managers in the University with women forming a small percentage in all cases" (p.6).It is for this reason that Onsongo (2011) suggests the following interventions:

- Increasing female access to university education.
- Mainstreaming gender issues in the university and establishing gender centre, and institutes to develop curricula, conduct training, conduct multidisciplinary gender-related research, engage in outreach programmes and advocacy, provide consulting/counselling, disseminate gender communication.
- Making the university environment gender supportive through curriculum transformation, staff development, etc.

The Nigerian Universities have however keyed into the movement that aims to address gender inequalities, imbalances, and injustice in higher education. While lip service is paid to addressing imbalances in politics, the economy and other strata of society, a few universities in Nigeria have taken action by establishing centre for gender studies. Such universities include those in Jos, Ibadan, Lagos, and Uyo. The centre for Gender and Women Studies in the University of Uyo is relatively new and is expected to contribute meaningfully in mainstreaming gender into its vision, mission, core values, policies, procedures and practices. Batta and Iwokwagh (2010) citing Bunyi (2003) elaborated on six cogent interventionist measures of gender mainstreaming in tertiary institutions to include affirmative action, gender-friendly varsities, gender sensitization, outreach programmes, expansion of opportunities and mounting of labour market relevant programmes.

5. Conclusion

In this article, it is established that women are missing and invisible in many Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics programmes in many tertiary institutions around much of the world though the issue is more problematic in sub-Saharan Africa. And as, Morley (2013) has noted, "it is indisputable that women are under-represented in senior leadership positions internationally" (p.15), such marginalisation is more palpable in Africa, indeed Nigeria. It is also true that universities can play a critical role in access to tertiary education for female citizens. In line with this conclusion, we echo and adapt the following suggestions promoted in Greg-Bowen and Mc-Farlane (2010):

- To facilitate women's growth and equality, Nigerian universities should regularly renew and review institutional curriculum in fair and open processes which consider and integrate women's issues as part of the equal opportunity tenets.
- Nigerian universities should design their educational mission carefully to facilitate the advancement and provision of opportunities for women.
- Higher educational institutions in Nigeria should show leadership by having more women in higher paid positions as their male colleagues.
- Nigerian universities should stress academic ethics to assure freedom to instruct and freedom to study for both genders.
- Governance in Nigerian universities should include men and women who are equally qualified to administer departments, faculties, colleges, institutes and directorates and entitled to equal opportunities, equal treatment and equal pay for both teaching and leading roles.

And finally, as Morley (2013) states, Nigerian Universities can increase the quality and numbers of females in higher education leadership just as the *Excellentia* programme in Austria demonstrates by:

- Offering extra financial incentives for the appointment of female professors and through annual budgets allocated to the programme.
- Promoting transparency and objectivity in appointment procedure rules that promote gender equality.
- Creating awareness of discriminatory processes and increasing the commitment to achieving the goals of gender equality.
- Deploying funds to initiate measures that promote young female academics on a more sustainable basis over the long term.

It is firmly believed that if higher institutions in Nigeria commit to these interventions, they would have contributed in some significant way to addressing the issue of missing and marginalised women. They would equally have contributed in some perceptible way to ending the erasure of women's lives and experiences. And they would likewise have helped in boosting the participation of women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics disciplines as well as in higher education leadership.

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