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Persistence of the Glass Ceiling in Academia Globally with a Focus on Women Academics in Kenyan Universities

By Bhoke Chacha¹

Abstract

Despite the existence of elaborate legal frameworks in Kenya that guarantee gender equity in all spheres of life, women academics in Kenyan universities still encounter many roadblocks in their quest to become professors. One position that has dominated recent discourse regarding the promotion of women in Kenyan universities is that women have generally arrived late into academia. It is also argued that the conflict between women's traditional roles at home and productive work interferes with academic leadership. This paper offers a rebuttal of these arguments, and gives empirical statistics on the number of women PhDs that have come through the ranks in Kenya during the past 15 years. It is guided by African feminism theory in the analysis of whether the absence of female professors in Kenyan universities is occasioned by the cultural paradigms of family and work; a decline in tenure positions in academic areas where women are dominant; and, a male supported administration. Finally, the paper evaluates the strategies that female academicians have adopted to break the 'glass ceiling' in Kenyan universities.

Keywords: Glass ceiling, Women academics, Academic promotion, African feminism, Kenyan universities

Introduction

While the Kenyan Constitution (2010) in Article 27 sections 1 and 3 is explicit that every person is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and equal benefit before the law, and that women and men have the right to equal treatment, including the right to equal opportunities in political, economic, cultural and social spheres; and Section 5 of the Employment Act (2007) Section 5 (3)(b) prohibits discrimination with respect to recruitment, training, promotion, terms and conditions of employment or other matters arising out of employment, the under-representation of women in positions of senior academic management within higher educational institutions in Kenya continues to be a matter of concern. Whereas all universities in Kenya proclaim to be equal opportunity institutions and practice an open-door policy for men and women in academic admission and recruitment by inviting job applications from both genders to ensure that the $\frac{1}{3}$ gender balance stipulated in the constitution is achieved in the recruitment, promotion and appointment of staff, female staff members, up to this day, complain that their male colleagues ascribe to them many stereotypes like being the weaker sex, low in confidence, emotionally unstable, less committed, and incapable of working as hard as men (Mbugua, 2007)

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in order to perpetuate the historically entrenched practice of excluding women from leadership and managerial roles in universities (Odhiambo, 2011; Amondi, 2010).

Gender mainstreaming in Kenyan universities owes its origin to a workshop in June 2004, which recommended that each university design to enhance gender equity. Between 2008 and 2010, majority Kenyan universities developed gender policy documents outlining their strategies to enhance gender equity. These strategies have since been revised to reflect the 1/3 gender rule stipulated in the Kenya Constitution 2010. As such, the enrollment of female academic staff in public and private universities in Kenya now stands at 6798 out of 20408 which is slightly over 33 percent (Commission for University Education, 2018) implying that the higher education authorities have met the constitutional threshold, but the statistic fails to address the under-representation of women in the decision-making organs in academia. In the past two decades, scholars have given attention to the slow pace in the growth of the number of women professors in Kenya. According to Raburu (2011) the number of women professors increased from 7.1 per cent in 2000 to only 10 percent in 2010. Gachukia (2002) is cited in Raburu (2011) as stating that Kenyatta University had one woman Deputy Vice Chancellor and 2 women professors out of 24; and Moi University had one woman professor of 37 professors. The figure has since grown to 16.5 percent (Commission for University Education, 2018) meaning that Kenyan universities have predominantly accorded promotions to male lecturers.

Many scholars have put forth theories to explain why women are rarely at the top of academic positions in nearly all universities in the world. Kanter (1977) is cited in Morley (2013) as the originator of the pipeline theory, which early on attempted to reflect on why women were under-represented in US corporations. The theory postulated that the under-representation of women at senior levels would reverse once generations of appropriately qualified women move through organisational hierarchies and become better placed for promotion. Morley provides an alternative view first articulated by (Leonard, 2001) which questioned Kanter's position on account that career trajectories are not so linear for many women who are often diverted into servicing roles and on short-term research or teaching contracts. The data presented in this paper is guided by the African feminism theory and discounts the pipeline theory considering that many research studies today are attempting to offer explanatory frameworks including gendered divisions of labour, gender bias and misrecognition, management and masculinities, greedy organisations and mentoring—all features of glass ceiling—for women's absence from university leadership that go beyond the reductive rationality of a pipeline.

African Feminism Views and the Promotion of Women Academics in Kenya

During the past century, women in most countries of the world have gained at least some access to higher education. In the west, higher education has been viewed as the mechanism through which women can acquire qualifications and credentials to prepare them for participation in the public sphere with the same advantages as men (Kelly & Slaughter, 1991). However, Kenyan universities are still striving to achieve a gender balance in students' enrolment and completion rates in order to strike a balance in male and female populations. The University of Nairobi, the oldest and the most established university in the country, is trying to meet this objective by providing mentoring and enabling environment for enhancing quality academic performance for both male and female students (UoN, 2015).

According to African feminist leaning scholars like Odhiambo (2011), Onsongo (2007) and Raburu (2011) the problem of women's under-representation in senior academic positions in

Kenyan universities can possibly be understood by examining the genesis and the growth of higher education in the country. African feminism is a type of feminism innovated by African women to specifically address the needs and conditions of African women in Africa. It aims at upsetting the existing matrix of domination and overcoming it, thus transforming gender relationships and conceptions in African societies and improving the situation of African women (Arndt, 2002). However, African feminism is not homogeneous and has been categorised into the reformist, radical and the transformative types. According to Arndt (2002) the reformist brand negotiates with the patriarchal society to gain new scopes for women while accepting the fundamental patriarchal orientation of their society as a given fact; whereas radical African feminism takes issue with traditional and modern forms of gender oppression alike, although it does not reject the uniqueness of African cultures. The transformative current, which is the most dominant, has informed many progressive policies in the continent and criticises the fundamentals of patriarchal social structures with the assumption that men have the ability to transform. The literature below reflects how the transformative branch of African feminism currently exposes how male privilege within Kenya has contributed to making women disappear at the top of academia, while at the same time showing that it is only through collaborations between African women and men academics that the issue of women's promotion can continue to be addressed.

Odhiambo (2011) argues that the quest by the Kenyan government since independence in 1963 to develop necessary *manpower* to take up leadership positions in various sectors was male oriented and reflected the colonial model on which it was based. As such, like the academy in ancient and medieval times, higher education institutions in Kenya were expected to educate and train men to replace departing male colonial civil servants. He adds that this male civil servant stereotype extended to other sectors and fostered bias against women in leadership positions, in placement, promotion, and decision-making. Hence, neither did the government nor the higher education institutions themselves consider it a priority to enroll women for higher learning, constructing a public view of higher education as a preserve for males (Odhiambo (2011). By 1997, women made up 28.8% of the total student population indicating a clear gender disparity in higher education institutions in Kenya (Munene, 2002).

Odhiambo (2011) and Onsongo (2006) are inclined to the view that there are fewer women staff in the universities because fewer women than men are enrolled in universities. They add that it is therefore not surprising that female academic staff are smaller in proportion to male staff. According to them, the issue of the number of women who access higher education has far reaching implications when it comes to acquiring academic positions as well as positions of leadership at policymaking levels. Like in any other African country the enrolment and participation of women in higher education in Kenya have been hampered by socio-cultural values, beliefs, and practices that militate against the education of girls (Odhiambo, 2011; Onsongo, 2007; Raburu, 2011).

The issue of women's access to higher education was brought to the global political agenda in 1998 when UNESCO convened a World Conference on Higher Education that reviewed the progress made in gender equality in higher education since the Beijing Conference in 1995 (Onsongo (2007). Early on in 1993, the Joint Admission Board (JAB) of the public universities lowered the entry requirement for women students in a bid to ameliorate the situation (Munene, 2002). Although it was implemented, the act was vigorously challenged by those who favoured admission on merit as they argued that modern societies ought to contend with the dilemma of competing values of merit and efficiency on the one hand and equity and social justice on the other when it comes to accessing higher education (Munene, 2002). In the end, the action did not come close to achieving parity between male and female student populations in Kenyan universities.

Tettey (2010) reports that between 2001 and 2005 student enrolment in Kenyan universities expanded by 55%, but the student population remained majorly male, with the proportion of female students at the national level remaining unchanged at 37% for most of the period. While the proportion of women students in public institutions stayed at about one-third, at private universities women's enrolments consistently outstripped those of men at 46% to women's 54% (Onsongo, 2007). But according to Wesonga et al. (2003) and FAWE (2001) as cited in Onsongo (2007), the increased enrolment of female students in private universities was not reflected in the female academic and management staff numbers in these universities.

The UNESCO conference cited above recommended that university chairs, professors, and heads of department posts be filled by men and women on an equal basis by 2010. However, although individual universities incorporated women's issues in their programmes, a review on gender research in 2007 revealed that no university in the country had instituted policy or mechanisms related to the implementation of the UNESCO proposals (Onsongo, 2007). The affirmative action employed by JAB has been limited to student admission to undergraduate programmes in public universities. In fact, data on graduate and postgraduate enrolments before 2010 indicated that master's and doctorate studies were dominated by men (Tettey, 2010), and nothing was being done with regard to the appointment of women into academic and administrative positions (Onsongo, 2007).

As such by 2010 the number of women in senior academic positions and executives was quite startling. Out of the 237 professors in the 7 public universities in existence at the time, only 24 were women, representing just over 10 percent. The statistic was a slight improvement up from 7.1 percent in 2000. Kenyatta University had one woman Deputy Vice Chancellor, and among full professors, there were 2 women out of 24 professors. Moi University had only one woman professor of 37 professors. Out of 65 lecturers, there were only 6 women. There were 50 women lecturers out of the total 417 in all public universities (Raburu, 2015). It is interesting to note that the numbers of female PhD graduates in both Kenyatta University and the University of Nairobi between the years 2000 and 2010, and between 2011 and 2018, averaged 24 percent and 34 percent respectively. The available staff establishment data for 2017 also indicate that out of 774 academic members of staff with PhDs at Kenyatta University, 266 (34 percent) were women, but there were only 4 (15 percent) women professors out of a total of 27. The situation is not different in the University of Nairobi where in the same year there were 267 (26 percent) women PhD academic members of staff, but only 29 (18 percent) women professors out of 161.

Why do Women Academics Disappear at the Top?

Studies all over the world suggest that the lack of women in the global academy's executive means that women are under-represented across all decision-making fora, including committees, boards and recruitment panels (Morley, 2013). Morley cites several authorities to show that despite the fact that women have shown themselves to be extremely capable educational leaders, and they have a great deal to contribute to the changing practice of educational management in response to the radical global restructuring of education, they disappear in the higher levels, when power, resources, rewards, and influence increase.

There is no doubt that universities are highly gendered institutions; homosociability and the perception of women as the 'problem' are global phenomena (Marchant & Wallace, 2013). Morley has studied the glass ceiling in academia in Europe and the entire Commonwealth for a considerable time now. She makes an interesting observation that the pattern of male prevalence

in senior leadership positions is visible in countries with diverse policies and gender equality legislation. She gives an example of the UK in 2009/2010 where women constituted 44 percent of all academics but only made 19.1 percent of staff in professorial roles, while men comprised 55.7% of academic staff in non manager roles and 72.0% of academic staff in senior management roles. Morley also cites She Figures (2009) who notes that data from the EU prove that academic careers of women are characterised by strong vertical segregation. She Figures (2009) observes that the proportion of female students (55%) and graduates (59%) in the EU exceeds that of male students, but women represent only 18% of the professors (Morley, 2013). Morley adds that in some locations, there has been a feminisation of penultimate managerial positions in the universities and gives the example of Australia where women constitute 40% of the pro-vice-chancellors but only 18% of the vice-chancellors; they remain under-represented at senior levels, earn less than males, and even with taking human capital into account, are less likely to apply for promotion. They are under-developed in terms of training provisions, and specifically, leadership development, and suffer similar discrimination from males as professional (non-academic) staff (Marchant & Wallace, 2013). Only in Sweden were there 43% of women vice-chancellors in 2010 (Husu, 2000): Rees, 2011) cited in Morley (2013), and even here eligibility criteria is high as women need to be two and a half times more productive in terms of publications than their male counterparts to get the same rating for scientific competence (Morley, 2013).

The position of women academics in African countries is even worse. According to Onsongo (2007), feminist studies conducted in universities, especially in the west and also in Africa, have shown that there is a male numerical and cultural dominance in universities that results university and academic life being highly gendered organisationally, structurally, and practically. Indeed, Odhiambo (2011) cites Morley (2006) as stating that 'gender disparity is most severe at senior academic and administrative levels'. Morley put the figure in Ethiopia as 6.1 percent, 19.7 per cent in Uganda, 12.4 per cent in Nigeria, and in Sierra Leon 17.6 per cent. Morley also studied the interventions instituted in five universities: University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; the University of Cape Town, South Africa; Makerere University, Uganda; the University of Ibadan, Nigeria; and the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka in South Asia and concluded that women were slowly entering senior management and academic positions in all of the five countries, but the overall proportion of women in these positions was still low and women staff reported limited opportunities to develop their research capacity (Odhiambo, 2011).

In Kenya, the university authorities may not accept that higher institutions have historically been sites of exclusion and elitism. Women academics here have to contend with a highly masculinist culture and several gatekeepers in the highly hierarchical management exhibited by the universities, even when confronted with official data within their keep. Kenyan universities have for a considerable period benefited from diversity in academic leadership roles and profess to value diversity (of thoughts, experiences, and persons) but they do not yet fully include women as the data in the previous section indicates: women remain under-represented in key positions along the academic career ladder. Nzomo (1995) and Onsongo (2007) have separately spearheaded feminist studies which have illustrated that women and men have equal potential to develop themselves in all spheres of life, but the realisation of women's potential is hampered by externally imposed constraints and the influence of social institutions and values (Odhiambo, 2011).

Kamau (2004) confirms this thesis when she observes that women live conflicted lives. She explains that women experience a multiplicity of role conflicts and negative traditional cultures which defines them as social deviants or outsiders insiders. She adds that they are considered as intruders, atypical, and at best outsiders in the academy; are excluded from informal

academic networks, lack academic mentors, suffer excessive workloads, and are marginalized by a strong patriarchal culture; their accomplishments are undervalued or discounted; they experience various forms of sexual harassment, and as a result their careers develop at a slower rate compared with those of their male counterparts.

Raburu (2015) also reports that the cultural attitudes and societal expectation have been used as a weapon to deny women appointments, promotion, and training opportunities in the guise that with their multiple roles, they are not able to fully commit themselves to paid employment, an excuse that has been used to deny them equal benefits and in turn, equal pay. Unfortunately, Kenyan universities are driven by cultural beliefs and general societal attitudes, viewing women's experiences in the academy as non-issues (Raburu, 2011). Yet when a woman academic goes to work she is exposed to two sets of conflicting demands—her job demands and her family responsibilities, which do not emerge for most male academics (Raburu, 2011). These multitude of responsibilities have constrained women from seeking for promotions to senior academic positions that would require them to devote more time to work and research, for once they delegate their domestic responsibilities to home-helpers (Muasya, 2016; Raburu, 2011), they are likely to be branded as neglectful and irresponsible (Raburu, 2011). In other words, they are forced to accept the glass ceiling, which is detrimental to their success. Okpara, Squillace & Erundu (2005) have argued that this melding of family and professional responsibilities among US women academics has diminished their teaching and professional performance, and constitutes a major factor that has led university administrators to mete injustices against women academics.

Institutional Practices that Contribute to Glass Ceiling on Women Academics in Kenyan Universities

Nearly all Kenyan universities pride themselves as equal opportunity employers, asserting they detest discrimination in terms of academic recruitment and employment. But Onsongo (2006) argues that although Kenyan universities don't practice open discrimination in academic recruitment, there exists subtle discrimination disguised in the requirements for promotion and appointments. She takes issue with recruitment advertisements for higher leadership positions which require applicants to be in possession of a PhD and to have worked in similar positions at other universities for not less than five years. (Odhiambo, 2011) reinforces Onsongo's position by stating that this requirement obviously disadvantages women who in most cases take long doing a PhD due to the multiple roles they play.

Onsongo (2006) rightfully observes that most women academics in Kenyan universities are found in lower grades as Tutorial Fellows, Assistant Lecturers, and Lecturers. She quotes several authorities to add that universities place great emphasis on publications and research to qualify for promotion to Senior Lecturer, Associate Professor and Professor. Sifuna (1989) is cited in Onsongo (2006) as stating that to get to such levels of career advancement, a woman has to face promotion and appointment criteria that on paper are quite clear, fair and espouse the principle of merit, but in practice are prone to abuse. It is true that women academics in Kenya do not deny that publishing is important for academics aspiring to advance professionally, and that research and publishing increases the visibility of the university, but they are disturbed by the over-emphasis placed on research when it comes to promotion (Migosi, Muola & Maithya, 2012), since women are more likely to be on the teaching track (Marchant & Wallace, 2013). Marchant & Wallace (2013) quote several authorities to argue that women academics do disproportionately more teaching, are more positively oriented toward teaching, identify more as teachers, invest

more in developing a teaching identity, are more likely to voluntarily practice the scholarship of teaching and learning, prepare more for teaching responsibilities, and hence, find it difficult to fit research in between their teaching, administration and pastoral care responsibilities. Nonetheless, universities undervalue teaching compared to research on matters of promotion.

Women academics who find themselves in such circumstances take too long to be promoted and are mostly resigned to the glass ceiling. Onsongo (2007) reports that she interviewed two women in a Kenyan university who had taken 10 and 11 years respectively before being promoted to the rank of senior lecturer, and another two women who had taken 6 and 7 years respectively before promotion to this rank. On the other hand, the four male respondents in her research had one male academic taking three years, another four years and the other two 5 years for a similar promotion.

In addition, most interview panels are usually male dominated and women candidates are frequently subjected to gender biased questions, which in most cases are irrelevant to the positions they are applying for (Manya, 2000 as cited in Odhiambo, 2011). Onsongo (2006) also identified other cases of gender inequality in Kenyan universities revolving around unfriendly work environments, including women leaders experiencing resistance from junior and senior male colleagues, arranging of meetings at odd hours, and rampant sexual harassment (Odhiambo, 2011). Mbugua (2007) also carried out an empirical study about the factors that influence women's progression to leadership positions in Kenyan universities: 52.5 percent of the respondents said that organizational culture inhibited the progression of women to top leadership positions; 64.7 percent said organizational politics hampered women academics' upward mobility; and 75.8 percent said that women are accorded equal leadership positions as men in Kenyan universities.

Appointments and promotions in Kenyan universities are somewhat dependent on a system close to patronage and sponsorship, cronyism, or the old boys' network (Sifuna, 2006), a practice that excludes women who are 'less willing to play the careerist games that men do' (Odhiambo, 2011). Further, many women's domestic and personal circumstances do not allow them to socialize in clubs where networks for career advancement and promotions are sometimes developed and sustained (Kamau, 2004). The fear of being labeled as a deviant keeps many women away from such social places (Kamau, 2004). Furthermore, old-boys' networks are usually both social and political and women are likely not to have access to these networks (Raburu, 2011). Raburu adds that women academics are motivated to pursue careers by the desire to accomplish certain family duties. On the contrary men are socialised in a male-dominated world, and are easily admitted to old boys' networks. Their names enter the lists of quotable authors, a feat that women cannot achieve for they lack the backing of other women and have no role models to guide them on the pathway forward.

All of the above withstanding, women academics still have the desire to maintain their positions and even to climb the professional ladder; they employ different strategies such as working hard, focusing on research and publication for promotion purposes (Raburu, 2015). Despite being engaged in teaching and administrative duties which are time consuming and fatiguing, especially in recent times when there has been massive expansion of university admissions, they still manoeuvre their ways to pursue scholarly writing. However, unlike their male colleagues who are more prolific in their early careers, women's contributions increase as they advance in age (Ndege, Migosi & Onsongo, 2011).

Conclusions

This article has demonstrated that academic women in Kenyan universities continue to experience cultural barriers to entry into leadership positions and face both direct and indirect discrimination. Although women cannot be dismissed for lack of higher education, their desire to teach and streamlining into teaching at the expense of publications, their exclusion from informal networks, and flawed, discriminatory recruitment and promotion processes constitute primary barriers. Apparent gains are patchy in that women tend to be confined to low rungs of the profession and men still constitute a large majority of academic professors such that parity in teaching at a high level may be far off. Moreover, the increasing numbers of women academics in Kenyan universities masks segmentation and marginalisation, indicating that the pipeline theory is not a useful explanation for this gender imbalance.

The pipeline effect is not supported here, because women academics in Kenyan universities have continued to be hired at the lowest levels while their representation at the top doesn't improve. Although many women enter into the system, not all of them are in the pipeline for promotion. While they are hired for teaching and research assignments many of them tend to remain as teaching-only staff. It is true that a few women academics both in the public and private universities have risen to the positions of vice chancellors through merit or through political connections, but they are exceptions to the rule, and their being at the top cannot be misconstrued as the non-existence of a glass ceiling. In any case their being at the top has only demonstrated their resilience and the capacity to lead: higher learning are currently losing out by constraining women's talents at the bottom in order to maintain the career trajectories of men on the typical path into senior management.

There is no doubt that women academics who observe their male colleagues move up the ladder while they keep missing out on promotion feel a sense of frustration. Acker & Feuerverger's study (2006) of 27 women academics in the faculties of education in Canada on some of the consequences of the gendered division of labour in universities, showed that women academics become frustrated by working excessively hard, taking responsibilities for supporting others, including colleagues and students, and being 'good department citizens', without being rewarded.

Hence, there is a need to articulate the inclusive nature of African feminism and its findings, to encourage both men and women to join in this discussion and to change the culture of higher education leadership so that women can flourish. The challenge before us is to make the universities gender free, and our main goal should therefore be to remove gender from the university system. Unfortunately, save for Odhiambo (2011) the existing scholarship avoids adopting a more holistic perspective that can bring men and women together to address gender inequalities. Hence, the ills of organisational culture, negative micropolitics, and informal practices that reinforce the glass ceiling against the promotion of women in Kenyan universities have become more entrenched.

The urgency, therefore, is to identify areas for equity and diversity in staff recruitment and promotion, and to enhance women academics' research capacities to change the culture of higher education with helpful insights of African feminism (Odhiambo, 2011; Onsongo, 2007; Chiweshe, 2018). Women should not remain passive victims but active and resilient to develop strategies to resist, subvert, overcome, and cope with the daily realities of life at the university as they encourage men to participate in breaking down the internal institutional mechanisms, which have generated and perpetuated personal/professional identities and practices of gendered inequality (Barnes, 2007). Strategies and policies must be developed both at national and local levels that are

geared towards increasing women's participation in decision-making and leadership in higher education in Kenya.

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