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Exploring examples of women's leadership in African contexts

Jacqui Poltera

The need to explore examples of women's leadership in African contexts has risen with initiatives such as the United Nations (UN) African Women Leaders Network, African Women in Science and Engineering, Leading Women of Africa, 2019 Forbes Women Africa Leading Women Summit, the African and European Union's recent "Women in Power" event (2018), the associated Declaration and Africa's Agenda 2063, the African Union's Women's Decade, Women and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and the UN's Commission on the Status of Women. Common to such initiatives is a recognition of the need to acknowledge and redress longstanding gender inequality and inequity, oppression of women, power imbalances, and patriarchal norms and systems. Part of this involves recognising and supporting women in leadership positions. It also involves analysing the opportunities and barriers women leaders face relative to their context, culture, and leadership roles and goals.

Theoretical interest in the topic has also risen in interdisciplinary academic debates. Representative here are discussions of gendered disparities in leadership positions, career advancement and pay, and the importance of analysing women's experiences of leadership in relation to contexts and power dynamics (Stead and Elliot, 2009; Gouws, 2008; Glass and Cook, 2015; Bauer and Burnet, 2013). In response to the criticism that mainstream leadership theory is overwhelmingly informed by the experiences of relatively privileged, white men in western countries, researchers have sought to analyse and showcase the achievements and experiences of women in leadership positions, including African women in leadership positions in African countries (Klenke, 2011; Trigg and Bernstein, 2016; Lituchy *et al*, 2017). Such research shares

with many of the articles in this issue, a focus on exploring the ways in which women enact leadership within specific contexts and situations, shaped by power imbalances.

One of the pervasive challenges with this special issue is that key concepts such as "women's leadership" can be taken for granted in the literature and applied in ways that are intuitively plausible at first glance, but on closer inspection require more conceptual analysis and care. Part of the challenge, as the articles here demonstrate, is the interdisciplinary nature of the topic. The authors draw on concepts and research from development theories, empirical studies across disciplines, psychology, feminist theories, African theories, social theories, political theories, economic theories, ethical theories, and an array of "grey" literature. In so doing, this edition represents a rich tapestry of scholarship, activism and praxis, which showcases and explores distinct examples of women's leadership across contexts in Africa. And yet, it can be unclear what, precisely, we mean when we employ terms such as "women's leadership", "African feminism", "feminist leadership", "intersectional approach", "leadership", and "African contexts". The relationship between such terms can also be unclear, as can the implications of how we apply them to how we advance thinking and dialogue on the topic. The risk is that in failing to clearly define key concepts it may result in "dubious implications for feminist scholarship and activism" (Meer and Muller, 2017:3). An implication of this edition is that it speaks to the need for ongoing dialogue and debate about key terms and concepts employed in theorising women's leadership in African contexts.

At its most basic, "women's leadership in African contexts" is an umbrella concept

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which denotes individual and collective leadership typically enacted by African women in African countries. A common normative assumption underpinning many of the articles here is that – ideally – women’s leadership should advance women’s rights and seek to redress inequalities, empower women and improve equity (with various recommendations on how to achieve that). This special issue highlights that as feminists, activists and scholars, in our efforts to advance women’s rights and redress inequity, we can fail to give enough time to debating and defining key concepts we take for granted. The papers here do not confine themselves to one understanding of “women’s leadership in African contexts”. Rather, together they showcase the myriad understandings of how such terms are applied and work in practice. Most contributors in this special edition of *Agenda* focus on women leaders, collective or individual, who advance women’s rights and improve socio-economic and political conditions for women in more or less overt ways. A few of the articles explore how men in leadership positions can be instrumental in advancing women’s rights, supporting women in leadership positions, and contributing to organisational and political cultures more conducive to redressing gender inequality. This is an important point which avoids the pitfall of assuming that in virtue of their gender, women leaders will be committed to or skilled in advancing women’s rights. An implication of this special issue is that “women’s leadership” cannot be understood as “leadership by women for women” without qualification and recognition of individual differences between women and groups of women.

Many of the papers also situate the ways in which women experience leadership and / or enact it within a particular context on the continent, drawing on intersectionality to highlight the ways in which race, gender, class, culture, sexuality and other social identities can enable or constrain leadership practice. And yet, it is worth noting intersectionality is itself a contested term, with opponents suggesting it is an ambiguous “buzzword, with dubious implications for feminist scholarship and activism” (Meer and Muller, 2017:3).

Underpinning this special edition is a recognition that African countries, cultures and contexts are distinct from western countries

and contexts which tend to inform mainstream leadership (and feminist) theories. Insights from mainstream leadership theories cannot be generalised to African contexts. The very concept of women’s leadership, particularly in the African context, is complex and open to contestation. Within and across African countries and contexts, there are multifarious racial, socio-cultural, ethnic, political, and historical norms which shape power relations and inform the ways in which women can and do lead in formal and informal ways (Amadiume, 1987; 1998; Mama *et al*, 2003). Not all women leaders are women in positions of political power or traditional (professional) leadership roles (Gasa, 2007). As such, more theoretical and empirical work is required to localise leadership theories and feminist theories in our continued efforts to explore and theorise women’s leadership on the continent. Arguably, many African countries face distinct leadership challenges to their western counterparts, for example, leadership challenges associated with colonial legacy, poverty, political violence, relative socio-economic instability, cultural diversity, oppression, corruption, public health challenges such as HIV/AIDs and maternal mortality, and profound inequality. And yet, Africa and the African context is not monolithic. There is a common thread across the articles of the importance of embracing the complexity and diversity of African contexts and exploring how that impacts on women in leadership and leadership which aims to advance women’s rights.

Criticisms of attempts to explore women’s leadership in the African context include treating women or African women as an homogeneous group, reducing distinct contexts within Africa to one monolithic “African context”, tending towards gender essentialism in characterising how women lead vis-à-vis their gender, placing undue primacy on quotas which can amount to tokenism, and overlooking the role that men play in promoting women’s rights and women’s leadership (whether directly or indirectly). Most of these criticisms are touched on and some addressed in the combined articles.

Overall, the contributions in this issue explore examples of how women (as individuals and collectives) practice leadership

across sectors, contexts and settings in Africa; experiences of women on the continent in formal and informal leadership positions; the contexts and complex power dynamics within which women enact leadership in African countries, cultures and organisations; and the ways in which women's rights can be promoted and advanced. Further, the articles variously explore (African) women's collective and individual leadership in rural and community-based contexts; corporate, public, grassroots, and activist organisations; politics and formal leadership positions; historically male-dominated fields such as the oil industry and politics; and across sectors and countries.

Formal and informal leadership

Feminist Srilatha Batliwala's (2010) situation of leadership in relation to power and its possible purposes is at the heart of the article in the issue by members of the Oxfam Transformative Leadership for Women's Rights (TLWR) Working Group. Writers Emily Brown, Esther Ekoue and Victoria Goodban document the findings from an evaluation of the programme, including *Raising Our Voices*, a programme that has aimed to strengthen women's involvement and activism in leadership and governance and case studies which illustrate an approach to women's leadership that goes well beyond many of the accepted liberal frameworks which have reduced women's leadership to a question of women's representation or appearance. TWLR's integration into Oxfam's core commitment to poverty alleviation means it is applied as a strategy across all programmes as well as an approach in gender equality projects. A Theory of Change applies to the informal and formal social levels, engaging with organisational culture and practice of individual and collective self-reflection. The article opens a window to the vast collective feminist engagement and activism in Africa to advance women in decision making through organising, negotiation, protest and not least the documentation of struggles by communities of women for recognition and voice at many levels. Their article strongly establishes the diverse contexts in which leadership by women is situated and asserted for development.

Mercia Andrews's case study on the Rural Women's Assembly, also drawing from Batliwala's (2010) understanding of power and its purpose, describes the rural women's movement context for organising and resistance to the threats to food and land sovereignty experienced by peasant and small-scale farmers. She describes the organisational strategies adopted by rural women in several Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries to demand accountability, a voice and representation and to protect their seeds against agri-business in Africa. The movement's organising and leadership methodology is based on collective learning and decision-making power and autonomy. Andrew's focus on the unrecognised and often invisible contributions of rural women in isolated, poverty-stricken communities in Africa at household and community level, is elaborated on in the research by Alpheus Mogomme Masoga and Allucia Lulu Shokane on the Ga-Sekororo community in Maruleng District, Limpopo province in South Africa where self-help groups organised by women contribute to the social, economic and political life of the community. The women's diverse informal leadership roles are mapped and suggest how self-organising by indigenous groups of women contributes to building cultures of participatory decision-making in contexts where formal structures of power and influence have done little to improving lives. The writers state: "It is argued that the informal associations meet the needs of poor households headed by women to build self-reliance and safety nets which work to the benefit of all the members.... As such, they can be seen to represent an alternative form of empowerment and exercise of power by women, by placing their energies in collective resourcefulness, thrift and an ethic of community care" (pg 45).

Staying at the community level, where many women experience daily discrimination, violence and social marginalisation, women's leadership in livelihood struggles is paradoxically not given weight or visibility. Khaya Mchunu's briefing reports on a collaborative skills project initiated by unemployed black women to assist others in the same disempowered and marginalised position to gain the skills needed for livelihoods and self-employment. Mchunu relates the importance of building solidarity

and sisterhood in the process of sewing skills training so that the participants can break down the discrimination, racism and prejudice which has immobilised them and ground their learning in collective solidarity and empowerment necessary to take the first steps to becoming actors in their communities,

The perspective by Jude Clark, Shula Mafokoane and Talent Ntombi Nyathi opens up a feminist conversation on the women's resistance slogan "*Wathinta abafazi, wathint' imbokodo!*". The writers reflect on the discourse and power of the slogans we chant when we protest, march and resist, and how their meaning has been deployed across contexts and time into the present. Young black feminists' refusal of the slogan (you strike the women, you strike the rock), at the Shut-Down march against gender violence in 2018 in Cape Town signifies for them an intergenerational tension among black feminists and the need for critical reflection on the meanings of black feminist leadership and social transformation in the post-Fallism present. They write: "It was, in retrospect a recognition of an emergence of an emancipatory discourse that critiqued the political project of democratisation that had not "adequately addressed the substantive representation, leadership, safety and dignity of Black womxn and queer bodies" (Matandela, 2017:11 cited by Clark *et al*, pg 68). Intergenerational dialogue between black feminists/womxn is taken further in the reportback on a learning circle held by Tekano on feminist leadership development for health equity. Collective review of organisational practice and theory of feminist leadership form a core part of Tekano's Fellows programme and the positioning of their work within the broader social struggles against poverty and inequality. Charting the course ahead entails learning from the past strategies of mass-based women's organisation and asking 'who should lead?' and 'how?'

Exploring and analysing women, power, and position

Jacqui Poltera and Jenny Schreiner problematise the meanings of leadership, women's leadership, feminist leadership and 'the African context', defending the

need for more conceptual clarity and rigour in how these terms are defined and applied. In the critical review of recent literature, they highlight the dangers of essentialising women or inadvertently placing undue pressure on women in formal leadership positions, by expecting that they will be more likely or better equipped to advance women's rights and redress inequality than men. In so doing, they point out that women face unequal pay and social discrimination in male-dominated hierarchies which disadvantage them in performing leadership roles effectively. They also outline salient differences between contexts in which women enact leadership in Africa, and mainstream discussions of leadership theory. They question the pressure on women to lead and achieve social transformation and whether women's leadership parity with men through gender quotas and reserved seats, has made a real difference. The writers conclude that there is a need for ethical and effective leadership by men and women that is based on the widely accepted and respected values of *Ubuntu* and advocate for continuing discussions about how best to define key terms in this important debate.

The question, 'what is the status of women in top decision-making and leadership positions in Africa?' is addressed in the profile by Nikoletta Pikremenou and Surbhi Mahajan 'Make Every African Woman Leader Count'. They profile the findings from the most recent annual review of progress in meeting the goals of the African Women's Decade by Make Every Women Count, an on-line project. The 2018 report covers Africa's five regions and 55 countries to identify where women are in political representation, in the judiciary and in business. The women-led organisation's mapping of Africa's women in leadership is supported with an analysis of progress, including gender quotas and reserved seats adopted by countries, and the institutional, socio-economic and cultural challenges faced by women in entering the public sphere and political participation. The profile provides a feminist data analysis with the objective of mobilising women, governments and academics on the continent to be aware of women's diverse struggles for a voice in decision making and women's participation in leadership as necessary to the full meaning of democracy:

“an objective of our research is to highlight positive consequences of women’s greater participation and inclusion around negotiating tables and its positive impact on gender equality, peace-building and socio-economic development” (pg 85). Pinky Lalthapersad-Pillay’s briefing in this issue brings to the fore the question of whether social gains driven by women’s understanding of the need for gender equality have achieved basic changes that reach the most vulnerable and poorest women. She profiles two women at the highest level of power, presidents Joyce Banda and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf who are examples of leaders who confronted one of Africa’s most urgent health problems, maternal mortality, in two different contexts, Malawi and post-war Liberia. She critically assesses their approaches as women with political power and authority in bringing down the number of deaths of women in childbirth against renewed commitment to meet the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and the continent’s health policy targets.

Patriarchy continues to pose the most significant barrier to women who are outside the structures of decision making and power as well as to those who are elected as MPs or as Ministers. Their capacity to introduce legislative change is circumscribed because of the low numbers of women in Parliament, even if women caucus across party lines. The open forum in this issue ‘Negotiating patriarchy? Exploring the ambiguities of the narratives on “male champions” of gender equality in Uganda Parliament’ by Amon Ashaba Mwiine focuses on the negotiation of women MPs who need to engage support for pro-women legislation from men. Mwiine’s interest is in the labelling of supportive men as ‘champions’ of gender equality against the criticism by feminists of the inherent danger of men speaking for women and thereby constraining women’s voices as unintelligible. Bringing gender power relations into focus he says: “... we cannot *simply* dismiss women activists’ option of male representation as mere legitimization of male hegemony, exemplified through men’s exercise of “power over” women” (pg 109).

The narratives of women in decision making in male-dominated organisations are examined in two contributions. Njeri Mwangiru’s article reports on a study with women in corporate and higher educational

institutions in Kenya and South Africa with the objective of identifying the obstacles and facilitators to meaningful participation in decision making. Mwangiru grounds her research approach in the feminist possibility of shifting the parameters within which the status quo of closed corporate organisational cultures are maintained in post-colonial Africa. She states (pg 126): “Research shows despite increasing (yet insufficient) numbers of women in leadership positions, this trend does not translate into women’s increased influence or power in organisations. Increases in appointments of women to organisational leadership roles, does not correlate with meaningful inclusivity and participation in decision-making processes.” Anthea Nefdt’s briefing explores the narratives of women in one of the most male-dominated organisational cultures, the petroleum industry. Her study highlights race based barriers to women’s entry to upper-management and the obstacles they have to navigate to get to the top. Nefdt discusses the recourse to gendered discourse strategies which women employ to survive and perform in the masculinised organisational culture as well as reliance on women’s networks for support and identity as women in the workplace. Both papers contribute to the understanding of women’s gender-specific needs in leadership where they are a minority and still under-represented in spite of policies on gender parity. There is a need to counter bias and embedded stereotyping which are difficult to address without stronger monitoring of affirmative action policies and open, gender-sensitive organisational cultures.

Conclusion

Common themes that emerge are resilience in the face of adversity; embracing the complexity and diversity of women practicing leadership; the need for more data and theoretical research on the topic to build and deepen understanding and evidence specific to the continent; the importance of conceptual rigour and clarity; the positive role of supportive networks; the ways in which necessity has driven innovation and leadership by women for women; and the need to continue discussion, debate, advocacy, theorising and policy reform to advance women’s leadership in various contexts across the continent.

This special edition is exploratory and the start of an important, if complex, conversation. In many ways it raises more questions than it answers about how to define and conduct scholarship on the topic. It also speaks to the need to continue rigorous theoretical scholarship, activism and dialogue about women's leadership in African contexts and to invite more contributions from a wider cross-section of African countries in the future.

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