9 *Women and leadership in African contexts: A review*

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Overview

This chapter aims to deepen the understanding of women's leadership from the perspectives of African women scholars and activists. Barriers to women's leadership are examined and transformative leadership and its links to women's leadership values and practices are considered. Traditionally, leadership tends to be associated with masculine traits, and it is often linked to strong beliefs about the role and position of women in society. There is a schism between the roles and traits associated with women and those associated with leadership, which inhibits women's enactment of leadership. The literature calls for a critical approach to understanding leadership as a concept and practice that considers women's leadership in African contexts. Researchers also identify the design and implementation of context-relevant interventions that target gender inequality in institutional culture and society, build women's skills and confidence, and support and empower them to enact leadership that responds to local challenges.

Introduction

In their 2019 paper 'Problematising women's leadership in the African context', Poltera and Schreiner (p. 10) argue that the 'term "women's leadership" is ambiguous and contested'. To illustrate their point, they raise several questions:

> Does [women's leadership] refer to particular women or groups of women?…Leadership by women (formal or informal) that advances women's rights?…Exercise of power by women organised as a collective? Leadership as individual achievement?…leadership at the behest of a political party or part of a collective? Leadership styles and/or traits shaped by values and qualities that we tend to associate more with women than men? If so, what are those values and qualities and are they really more attributable to women than to men? Are women more likely to lead in a certain way than men? Is women's leadership synonymous with 'feminist leadership'?
> (Poltera & Schreiner, 2019, p. 10)

Poltera and Schreiner (2019) go on to suggest that the lack of conceptual clarity extends to 'African contexts'. Taking this as a departure point, this chapter begins by examining what the understandings of women and leadership in African

contexts are. This is followed by an exploration of transformative leadership and its place in African women's leadership practices. Informed by the understanding that transformative leadership is key to addressing the unequal norms that often prevent women from accessing and enacting leadership, the chapter seeks to examine best practices in relation to interventions that address sociocultural and other barriers to women's leadership in organisations and diverse African communities. To do this, the chapter uses three organising questions:

1. What is transformative leadership? How is it influenced (or not) by gender?
2. What are the barriers to transformative leadership for women in various African contexts?
3. What interventions might enhance women's transformative leadership in diverse African contexts?

Women and leadership in Africa: Engaging with the concept(s)

In a 2009 article, Nkomo and Ngambi (p. 49) write, 'While the empirical literature on leadership and management in Africa is sparse, the literature on African women in leadership is even sparser'. Not much has changed since then. Much of the research on leadership is done in Western contexts (Amayah & Haque, 2017), and as Poltera (2019, p. 3) argues, mainstream leadership theory is 'overwhelmingly informed by the experiences of relatively privileged, white men in western countries'. In addition to, and perhaps as a symptom of, these gaps in and limitations of leadership research and mainstream leadership theory, Poltera (2019) and Poltera and Schreiner (2019) suggest that the lack of conceptual clarity about women's leadership and African contexts hinders efforts to understand and nurture women's access to decision-making positions in various spheres. To advance scholarship, activism, and praxis in this area, they argue, these concepts, the relationships between them, and how they can be used need to be more clearly defined. These gaps and limitations in research and theory offer a unique research opportunity that would contribute to scholarship, activism, and the development and support of women leaders in African contexts.

Women and leadership

Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb (2011, p. 476) observe that '[h]ow people become leaders and how they take up the leader role are fundamentally questions about identity'. According to them, people claim and are granted leader identities in social interactions that are shaped by 'culturally available ideologies about what it means to be a leader' (Ely et al., 2011, p. 476), and what it means to be male or female. Because gender is a significant social identity, it is often at the centre of the relational and social process of leader identity construction (Moorosi, 2020). 'In most cultures, the meaning [of leader or leadership] is masculine,

making the prototypical leader a quintessentially masculine man: decisive, assertive, and independent' (Ely et al., 2011, pp. 476–477). From this perspective, women embody more communal traits (friendly, helpful, nurturing, selfless) not traditionally associated with leadership (see also Dahlvig & Longman, 2010). This 'perceived mismatch' (Amayah & Haque, 2017, p. 103) between the female gender role and the leader role, a result of pervasive gender stereotyping, disadvantages women, who are less likely to be perceived as leaders or associated with leadership, and can lead to backlash against women leaders. For these reasons, 'as a group that is not traditionally associated with leadership, it is even more important to understand the ways in which women construct their leadership identities' (Moorosi, 2020, p. 2).

Importantly, in addition to the individual and social aspects of leadership identities, experiences, and behaviours, reflecting as they do the gendered power relations of the society of which they form part, 'organisational environments are themselves gendered' (Hopkins, O'Neil, Passarelli, & Bilimoria, 2008, p. 350). Designed by and for men, organisations and systems tend to offer more barriers to leadership opportunities and success for women, and few facilitators. In addition to revealing the perceived dissonance between what and who a leader is and what a woman is (Poltera & Schreiner, 2019), studying women's experiences and enactments of leadership draws attention to the problematic gendered norms and power dynamics that serve to reinforce gendered inequalities and undermine women's leadership at the individual, sociocultural, and structural level. Understanding these dynamics can facilitate the development and implementation of strategies for developing and nurturing women's leadership.

In an interesting critique of mainstream understandings of women's leadership, Poltera (2019, p. 4) takes exception to what she refers to as 'a normative assumption' that women's leadership 'should advance women's rights and seek to redress inequalities, empower women and improve equity'. This assumption, she contends, places undue responsibility on the shoulders of women leaders to effect transformational change to advance women's rights and address gender inequity, this in contexts where they are already buckling under the burden of society's personal, social, and professional expectations and biases. To be successful, programmes that target women for leadership must balance these expectations against the necessity of putting them in leadership positions and challenge or reduce their impact on individuals and groups.

In some African contexts (South Africa as a fairly new postcolonial country is one such context), race plays a significant role in whether and how women might aspire to or take up leadership positions and how they might enact such leadership. While they only briefly mention race as a factor in women's leadership identities, experiences, and behaviours, Hopkins et al. (2008, p. 350) acknowledge that '[f]or women of colour, opportunities to advance in the ranks of organisational leadership are even more difficult than for White women'.

Indeed, as discussed above, much of the existing research on women's leadership has focused on the leadership identities, experiences, and behaviours of White women and, more often than not, White women in the Global North. Linked to this, the dearth of research on women's leadership in the Global South, particularly in African contexts, limits the usefulness of mainstream leadership theory in these settings. Studies on how women experience or enact leadership in the Global South are critical to developing a better understanding of the structural and cultural barriers women leaders or aspiring women leaders face in their efforts to develop and better support women's leadership in these settings (Amayah & Haque, 2017).

Women in leadership in African contexts

Given the problematics of the notion of 'women's leadership in African contexts' discussed above, it is necessary to look towards a useable and useful definition that will allow for the continued study of this area of scholarship, activism, and praxis. As guest editor of a themed issue of *Agenda* (a South African feminist journal) spotlighting women's leadership in African contexts, Poltera (2019, pp. 3–4) offers a descriptive definition as a starting point: 'At its most basic, "women's leadership in African contexts" is an umbrella concept that denotes individual and collective leadership typically enacted by African women in African countries'. Importantly, this definition must be used not only to respond to the complex contexts and power dynamics in which women lead (formally or otherwise), but also to distinguish this definition from normative assumptions about ethical, useful, and transformative leadership. By implication, work on women's leadership in the African context cannot treat women or Africa as homogenous, and ideally needs to distinguish effective, ethical leadership from 'women's leadership' (Poltera & Schreiner, 2019, p. 15). Such leadership is contextually bound, and its enactment is influenced by several intersecting factors and norms, including 'racial, socio-cultural, ethnic, political, and historical norms' (Poltera, 2019, p. 4). These factors and norms inform power relations that govern whether and how women become leaders and how they enact their leadership. Thus, understanding women's leadership in African contexts requires a critical, intersectional approach. According to Poltera (2019, p. 4), while intersectionality is itself subject to critique, this framework offers a lens for analysing 'how race, gender, class, culture, sexuality and other social identities can enable or constrain leadership practice' in particular contexts on the African continent.

Among the leadership challenges affecting many African countries are those associated with the legacy of colonialism, poverty, political unrest and violence, relative socioeconomic instability, cultural diversity, HIV and AIDS, and inequality. Significantly, however, beyond the widespread essentialist and

homogenising views of Africa, African countries are in many ways vastly different from the Western countries in which much of mainstream leadership theory is developed and used (Poltera, 2019). Linked to this, despite studies that tend to view African women as a monolithic group, leadership practice is (arguably) shaped by the contexts in which women enact leadership. Women in different contexts will experience different barriers to and opportunities for leadership (Poltera & Schreiner, 2019). Understanding African women as monolithic leads to 'gender essentialism in characterising how women lead vis-à-vis their gender. [This places] 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)' (Poltera, 2019, p. 4). These findings have implications for understanding women's leadership and the interventions that might work to support those who are or aspire to be leaders. Such work must seek to rigorously 'analyse how systems, structures and social relations of class exploitation, patriarchy, national and racial oppression, influence the leadership practice of women' (Poltera & Schreiner, 2019, p. 10).

So what progress has been made in women's leadership in various African contexts? Pikremenou and Mahajan (2019) profile findings from a 2018 Make Every Woman Count report on progress made in meeting the goals of the African Women's Decade in 55 countries in relation to political representation, the judiciary, and the business sector. The report highlights progress in terms of gender quotas in various parliaments and the challenges women face in political participation. Pikremenou and Mahajan (2019) identify implications for women's activism and for policy-makers and academic institutions to understand the challenges women face in accessing and participating in decision-making and leadership in various political and social spaces. Pointing to the need for women's understandings of and participation in transformational leadership in African contexts (discussed below), Pikremenou and Mahajan (2019, p. 85) assert that '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'.

Notwithstanding the progress made in increasing women's numbers in political positions in various countries, several articles focused on the continuing negative influence of patriarchy on women's progress both in parliamentary positions and in other spheres of society. For example, when examining women's roles in decision-making positions in predominantly male-dominated industries, Mwagiru (2019) identifies challenges and facilitators of meaningful participation in corporate and higher educational institutions in Kenya and South Africa. She concludes that while there are increasing numbers of women in leadership positions in these spaces, 'this trend does not translate into women's increased influence or power in organisations…[or] meaningful inclusivity and

participation in decision-making processes' (Mwagiru, 2019, p. 126). Nefdt's (2019) findings from a study with women in the petroleum industry underline the significance of race and gender equality as barriers to women's ascension to leadership positions in the industry and the coping strategies they use in this male-dominated space, including networking with and drawing support from other women in the workplace. These findings have implications for policies and programmes that address unequal norms and provide a policy framework for instituting and monitoring gender-equal practices in various institutions in both the public and private sector. Without these interventions, women's leadership in various spheres and their ability to significantly change the lives of other women and girls in their institutions and communities will remain constrained. In other words, women's transformational leadership capacities will remain marginal.

Understanding transformative leadership

To understand women's transformative leadership and what works to develop and nurture it in various institutions and communities, a conceptual understanding is necessary (see Swartz, Chapter 1, and De Kock & Swartz, Chapter 2, this volume, for a detailed conceptual analysis). What is transformative leadership? How does gender and context influence it? The transforming leadership framework developed by Burns (1978) is helpful for addressing these questions. For Burns, it is essential to differentiate between transactional and transforming leadership. His research suggests that transactional leaders function within rigid organisational structures such as the military, give directives, and focus on results. In contrast, transforming leaders need to form relationships with those they lead and work with them to motivate and empower them to perform at higher levels, and also to value intrinsic rewards more than extrinsic acknowledgement.

Inspired by Burns' (1978) work, Bass (1985) investigated the underlying psychological mechanisms of transforming leadership and examined how such leadership could be measured. According to Bass (1985), transforming leadership is represented in four dimensions, referred to as 'the four I's': idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration. Informed by this understanding, scholars have identified some of the characteristics of transforming leadership as '[c]ommon vision, cooperation, communication, ethical and moral values [and] integration in which he/she works towards developing an institutional culture that nurtures these among those they lead' (Unal & Kilinc, 2016, p. 136). In this vein, Tichy and Ulrich (1984, p. 59) refer to a transformational leader as one who can 'help the organisation develop a vision of what it can be, to mobilise the organisation to accept and work toward achieving the new vision, and to institutionalise the changes that must last over time'.

Some decades later, Bass and Riggio (2006) developed a model in which they argue that transformational leaders focus on developing relationships with their followers and aim to inspire positive development by behaving as role models, through inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and mentorship. For Bass and Riggio (2006), transformational leaders respond to the specific needs of their followers and motivate them to develop their leadership skills. Furthermore, for Northouse (2013, p. 185), a transformational leader not only seeks to change and transform people but is also 'concerned with emotions, values, ethics, standards, and long-term goals…[and] includes assessing followers' motives, satisfying their needs, and treating them as full human beings'.

More recently, Montuori and Donnelly (2018, p. 2) have posited that 'the world is in the throes of an epochal change, a transformation' and that this 'transformative moment' is calling for everybody to lead and work towards the changes they want to see in their worlds. They argue that this is 'the basic premise of transformative leadership' (Montuori & Donnelly, 2018, p. 1). Montuori and Donnelly (2018) differentiate between transforming, transformational, and transformative leadership. For them, transformative leadership differs from the other two forms in that it is not dependent on a leader–follower relationship. Instead, transformative leadership is a collaborative endeavour to bring about change for all concerned, allowing individuals to capitalise on a transformative moment and 'lead by creating the future in the present' (Montuori & Donnelly, 2018, p. 3).

Women and transformative leadership

While a plethora of writing is available on how transformative leadership is enacted by men, particularly in the Global North, there is very little rigorous research focusing on women and transformative leadership in African contexts. In addition, women's experiences and enactments of transformative leadership have hardly been documented. Some exceptions include Bass and Riggio (2006) and the Mastercard Foundation's (2014) report *Women's Transformative Leadership in Africa*. The report defines transformative leadership as essentially 'making or influencing positive change and addressing inequity. The concepts of critique and promise are central: transformative leaders see a problem and ask themselves "what can I do?" to solve it' (Mastercard Foundation, 2014, p. 3). In other words, transformative leadership seeks to effect social change to benefit women and others in communities and institutions. To be truly transformative, such leadership is inclusive and participatory and uses participatory methods to draw on the skills, knowledge, and values of all members of the community or institution (Batliwala, 2010).

This understanding aligns with Montuori and Donnelly's (2018, p. 9) assertion that transformative leadership calls for new 'ways of being, relating, knowing,

and doing'. In this vein, the Mastercard Foundation (2014) report identifies characteristics of transformative leaders as including, among others, ethical decision-making, integrity, creativity, altruism, personal authenticity, and resilience.

Barriers to women's transformative leadership

Considering that men have historically held more leadership positions than women, it is unsurprising that the traits traditionally associated with good leadership are customarily ascribed to men. Interestingly, conceptualisations of transformative leadership tend to shift this perception (Stempel, Rigotti, & Mohr, 2015). Research suggests that women often perceive themselves, and are perceived, as adopting transformative leadership styles more than men. For example, Bass and Riggio (2006) conclude that women make better transformative leaders than men because they are more likely to be trusted and respected by their followers and display more significant concern for individual needs. As Bass and Riggio (2006) observe, this is a controversial topic and one which is based on traditional gender norms and gendered stereotypes. This binary understanding of gender and leadership leaves little room for exploring the leadership styles among gender-neutral or gender-non conforming people.

What are the barriers to such leadership for women in Africa, and how might they be addressed? Amayah and Haque (2017) identify societal culture, occupational culture, gender stereotypes, and lack of access to education as significant barriers to African women's access to positions of leadership. Where do these barriers originate? In her critical account of the history of colonialism and gender on the African continent, Agbaje (2019) observes that colonialism profoundly impacted intergroup structures in Africa. According to Agbaje, by giving men more recognition than women, colonial institutions significantly impacted gender identification, gender roles, and gender stratification in Africa. In the South African context, in his 2016 book *Teaching the Native: Behind the Architecture of an Unequal Education System*, Reilly argues that it was the British Empire that bestowed upon us the current gender regimes in families, communities, institutions, and society. In her piece 'From Gender Apartheid to Non-Sexism: The Pursuit of Women's Rights in South Africa', Andrews (2001) argues that the Apartheid regime built on the history of colonialism in its policies geared towards the subjugation of women, particularly Black women. Andrews (2001, pp. 694–695) writes that '[t]he system of Apartheid existing in South Africa since 1948 and the previous periods of colonialism left all South African women in a subordinated position'. This left a racialised hierarchy of oppression that pitted groups of women against each other. At the bottom of this hierarchy were African women, followed by the so-called Indian and Coloured women, and at the top of this pyramid were White women. The legacy of this social experiment is still felt in every sphere of society in present-day South Africa.

Linked to the above, turning to unequal gender norms in communities and institutions, Bawa (2020, p. 2487) adopts a postcolonial African feminist theoretical lens to explore how 'reference to culture irredeemably reduces women's rights issues to a realm of colonial discursive framing that makes it difficult to imagine a transformative approach to women's issues'. Highlighting the problematic nature of 'culture' as a concept, particularly in postcolonial contexts, Bawa (2020, p. 2489) suggests that we need to take a broader perspective and 'connect rights issues to political, religious, environmental, global neoliberal, and technological changes, among others'. As argued in this chapter, the traditional notions of femininity, according to which women are viewed and often view themselves as inferior to men and, therefore, unable to be effective leaders, negatively impact their desire and ability to lead. According to traditional gender roles, traits associated with women and femininity are incompatible with leadership, which requires traits associated with men and masculinity (Poltera & Schreiner, 2019). In addition to explicit gender bias, women more often experience implicit gender bias than men and they are less likely than men to see themselves as potential leaders. Given the barriers faced by women in accessing leadership, it is hardly surprising that one of the challenges to leadership development among women in African contexts and elsewhere is the scarcity of women leaders to serve as role models to peers and younger aspiring leaders (Ely et al., 2011; Moorosi, 2020).

Despite literature suggesting that women face numerous barriers to leadership, emerging scholarship posits that they are better transformative leaders than men, with some scholars concluding that women tend to find their voices and agency through this form of leadership. While most of this literature uses the concept of transformational leadership rather than transformative leadership (the distinction is discussed above), it helps to enhance our understanding of the barriers women face in their access to and enactment of leadership generally and of transformative leadership specifically.

For example, in a review of the literature, Dahlvig and Longman (2010, p. 241) cite findings from a 2003 study by Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and Van Engen that compare 'men's and women's scores on a survey that measured transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership'. The study concludes that women tend to exhibit traits that enhance leadership and that, in contrast, 'men, more than women, manifest styles that relate only weakly to effectiveness or that hinder effectiveness' (Carli & Eagly, 2007, p. 138, cited in Dahlvig & Longman, 2010, p. 241). According to Dahlvig and Longman (2010, p. 241), 'the characteristics of transformational leadership tend to be more stereotypically feminine (i.e., congruent with expected gender roles), resulting in greater acceptance of women in leadership'. Citing the work of Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt (2001) and Yoder (2001), Dahlvig and Longman (2010, p. 241) conclude that '[t]hrough transformational leadership,

therefore, women's contributions to leadership may be tapped in ways that do not provoke prejudice related to overt or subtle beliefs about gender role norms'. However, adding a cautionary note about the role of religion (and cultural values and norms), they conclude that 'although women have been shown to be effective transformational leaders, prejudicial views about leadership may harm the ability of Christian women to envision themselves as leaders' (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010, pp. 240–241). From this perspective, they cite an article in the *Harvard Business Review* titled 'Do Women Lack Ambition?' (Fels, 2004) that analyses interviews with women about their views regarding ambition and achievement. In this article, Fels concludes that due to their internalised notions of leadership, most women reject ambition in favour of their caretaking role, a more feminine function aligned to societal expectations of women (Fels, 2004, cited in Dahlvig & Longman, 2010).

However, a survey involving 184 respondents conducted by Begum, Jan, and Khan (2013, p. 307) sought to 'examine transformational leadership, gender role orientation and leadership effectiveness of male and female leaders within the context of education and health departments in Pakistan and Turkey'. The study finds no differences in leadership styles between men and women. While the study finds contextual differences in leadership styles between Pakistan and Turkey, the findings indicated minor differences in the leadership styles (transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire) of males and females, with both men and women scoring high on the transformational leadership style.

Beyond the gendered and stereotypical notions of leadership, the literature highlights the positive role of transformative leadership among and for women. For example, Kouzes and Posner's work attributes to women the characteristics of 'modelling the way (or leading by example), inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart' and they conclude that this kind of leadership, which promotes 'collaboration, empowerment, and shared vision, resonates with many women' (Kouzes & Pozner, 2005, cited in Dahlvig & Longman, 2010, p. 254). A more nuanced explanation is offered by Eagly's (2007) conclusion that

> women search for a style that is not, particularly, masculine or feminine. As the transformational style is more androgynous [than other forms], it can be adopted by women in search of a neutral style avoiding the prejudice of being incompatible with the traditional idea of a kind woman and of an agentic leader.
> (cited in Hryniewicz, Gonçalves, & Vianna, 2018, p. 333)

The preceding discussion suggests that while women face numerous barriers to leadership based on the values it promotes, transformational leadership seems to favour them more than men. Thus, despite the conceptual distinctions between

transformational and transformative leadership (and the confusion many display by using these terms interchangeably), research on the conditions under which women can become successful transformative leaders, and the factors that facilitate such leadership, is needed.

Nurturing transformative leadership among African women

Mwagiru (2019, p. 126) argues that while there is an

> increasing (yet insufficient) number of women in leadership positions, this trend does not translate into women's increased influence or power in organisations. Increasing [the number of women appointed] to organisational leadership roles does not [necessarily] correlate with meaningful inclusivity and participation in decision-making processes.

According to Mwagiru, interventions must aim to reduce or eliminate the barriers that inhibit women's participation in decision-making. Such programmes must focus on 'growing available data on women leaders, boosting leadership policy support, and promoting mentorship, peer networking and flexible working environments' (2019, p. 126). This will essentially transform the cultures of institutions and organisations in which women work.

Investigating this same issue, Mukoni (2018) conducted a study examining women's participation in community environmental education in Zimbabwe. Drawing from participant observations, documentary analysis, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions in one community environmental organisation in Zimbabwe, Mukoni's findings suggest that

> [o]n the one hand, there was a high number of women attending CEE [Community Environmental Education] activities [in the organisation]. On the other, their active and meaningful participation in these activities and decision-making in the organisation remained limited. While they had access to the organisation, they lacked the voice and agency necessary for meaningful participation in the various CEE activities offered. Reasons for this included unequal gender norms, a male-centred curriculum and pedagogy, and a shortage of female facilitators. (Mukoni, 2018, p. i)

These findings have implications for gender-responsive interventions at organisational, policy, and community levels.

Leadership development

What interventions can be implemented to develop or nurture transformative leadership among women? The literature available identifies some broad

approaches to interventions. The first among these is leadership development, which, used in organisational development studies, is defined as 'expanding the collective capacity of organisational members to engage effectively in leadership roles and processes' (Day, 2001, p. 582, cited in Hopkins et al., 2008, p. 351). For Hopkins et al. (2008, p. 360), 'leadership development increases women's portfolios of human, social, and political capital…[resulting] in benefits at both the individual and organisational levels'. For these scholars, access to education, mentoring and coaching, and career planning for women are vital to developing women's capacity for transformative leadership. These strategies further ensure that women are linked to networks with other women, allies, and mentors. Networking builds the social capital necessary for women to cope with, challenge, and transform the marginalisation they face in the workplace vis-à-vis their leadership and career advancement.

To address the unequal power relations that make participation and decision-making meaningless or tokenistic for women in organisations, we need a shift in our understanding of leadership and its role in organisations and communities. For example, as Batliwala (2010, p. 5) warns, efforts to shape and assess leadership building interventions must be informed by the understanding that

> leadership is a means, not an end. We build leadership capacity and skills for something, to do something, or change something, and not because leadership is a product or service for consumption. This is especially true in social justice contexts.

Batliwala (2010) further argues that while we should celebrate women's participation and decision-making in institutions or organisations, these in and of themselves do not signal the elimination of unequal power between men and women. According to her, organisations need to do more than just capacitate more women to occupy leadership positions (Batliwala, 2010). In their efforts to effect social change, organisations also need to implement policies and programmes that enable them to lead differently (Batliwala, 2010). In other words, to lead in a socially just manner, men and women need to be guided by values and norms that enhance equity and social transformation.

Empowering women for leadership

The literature links the second set of strategies for nurturing women's leadership to the empowerment discourse and to notions of developing and enhancing women's agency for activism. For example, Bawa (2016, p. 120) draws from an ethnographic study in which she 'examined women's rights and empowerment discourses within Ghana's postcolonial environment'. From an analysis of data from 9 focus group interviews and 16 in-depth individual interviews using social capital as an analytical lens, she concludes that

> because women's relationships with capital are structured by local
> socio-cultural and global economic structures and relations, the
> theorisation and application of the concept of empowerment needs
> to recognise the complicated relationships (with capital) that women
> negotiate on a daily basis. (Bawa, 2016, p. 119)

Arguably informed by the same understanding, Cornwall (2016, p. 342) draws on a 'multi-disciplinary and multi-perspectival' research programme called Pathways of Women's Empowerment, conducted in the United Kingdom and several African, Asian, and South American countries. The project examined the conditions under which 'the "motorways" of mainstream development policies for women and girls might work in favour of greater justice and equality and the broader democratisation of power relations in society' (Cornwall, 2016, p. 343). The project focused specifically on 'women's lived experiences of empowerment and the effects and effectiveness of interventions that sought to enhance women's rights, power and agency' (Cornwall, 2016, p. 343).

Cornwall used a framework developed by Gender at Work to analyse the findings. This international feminist network supports organisations to develop institutional cultures geared towards gender equality (see Kelleher & Rao, n.d.). The framework posits that to be effective, programmes that target women for empowerment must prioritise several building blocks, including building women's critical consciousness, building collective power, establishing positive relationships with and in organisations, and shifting perspectives about the identity and positions of women in communities. To facilitate such programming, organisations must engage grassroots role players (those who understand the context) as implementers.

Cornwall (2016) identifies the often 'hidden pathways' to what facilitates women's empowerment, with implications for transformative development practice in women's organisations and among the donor community. One pathway is providing external donor funding that enables organisations' long-term engagements (rather than short-term grants), enabling organisations and their constituencies to set their own agendas and to be able to respond to local issues and opportunities without pre-imposed expectations. Other routes include providing institutional support, engaging organisations that have a firm grounding in and knowledge of communities and women's issues therein, and building positive relationships with them. According to Cornwall (2016), such programming requires policy-makers and development practitioners to heed Sen's (1997) caution that empowerment programming must shift its purpose from providing resources and services to women and must, instead, create conducive spaces for building women's confidence and self-esteem to solve local community and institutional issues.

Women's agency and activism

Similarly, other scholars and development practitioners have argued for developing women's agency and activism to enhance their leadership capacity. For example, with the African Union seemingly prioritising gender equality (more than its predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity), Adams' (2019) study critically examines the role of women's movements and their agency in ensuring this policy shift. However, while there is a policy shift, gender equity remains unattainable, and actions on the ground and women's material lives remain primarily unchanged (Adams, 2019).

Writing in the context of North Africa, Ennaji (2019) explores women's movements and political activism. She concludes that women's activism is key to addressing gender inequality in leadership in African (and other) contexts. Women's organisations play a significant role in facilitating their agency in challenging the unequal gender norms that keep them subjugated. For Ennaji (2019), women's activism not only addresses gender discrimination but also significantly contributes to and enhances the democratic participation of all members of institutions and communities.

In the context of South Africa, Mkhize and Mgcotyelwa-Ntoni (2019) report on a qualitative study that examined women leaders' experiences in the national government. The findings from the study suggest a link between women's activism and gender-transformative policies in government. Specifically, Mkhize and Mgcotyelwa-Ntoni (2019 , p. 9) note that women's activism plays an enabling role in women's leadership, 'helping them to push the gender transformation agenda in policy formulation policies…gradually engendering the recognition of women and promoting their participation in these institutions'. However, they caution that this does not mean that gender inequality in these spaces is eliminated or that women's leadership is guaranteed. According to them, women's activism has enabled them to be active agents of transformation, particularly in gender transformation in the political space in South Africa.

At a skills level, acknowledging education as a critical driver of sustainability and gender equity, Segovia-Perez, Laguna-Sanchez, and De la Fuente-Cabrero (2019) conducted a study to assess the impact of a women's leadership programme on women university students in Spain. The study involved 'three focus groups to evaluate changes in [the students'] perceptions of themselves and their self-confidence' (Segovia-Perez et al., 2019, p. 1). The authors conclude that the programme 'inspired [the women] and confirmed changes in their self-confidence and view of their personal capacities, including reflection on facing challenges in the work environment' (Segovia-Perez et al., 2019, p. 1). These findings suggest that empowerment programming that builds women's skills through training and improves their self-confidence enables them to access and succeed in leadership positions.

Conclusion

A plethora of literature bemoans the various barriers to women's access to leadership positions in institutions and communities, including gender inequality, unequal educational opportunities, and low self-esteem. First, the literature reviewed in this chapter indicates varied understandings of women and leadership in African contexts. This lack of conceptual clarity is linked to the traditional gender norms that associate leadership with masculine traits and, therefore, view men as the only legitimate leaders in all spheres of society.

In the workplace and society generally, this inhibits women's access to decision-making and positions of leadership that could influence social change. Linked to this is the tendency of the available scholarship to conceptualise African women as a homogenous group and to decontextualise their leadership experiences. Homogenising the African continent and women's leadership experiences not only makes the diversity of women on the continent invisible, but also hides the unique factors that inhibit their leadership and renders the development and implementation of effective ameliorative interventions impossible.

Second, informed by an understanding that transformative leadership is key to addressing the unequal norms that often prevent women from accessing and enacting leadership, the chapter explores the concept of transformative leadership and its links to women's leadership practices in African contexts. Scholarship is emerging that suggests that interventions that target the unequal gender norms inhibiting access to decision-making positions have been successfully implemented in different contexts on the continent. A review of these interventions suggests that transformative leadership tends to be more effective in enabling women to use their voices and agency to influence equity and social change in organisations and society.

If transformative leadership is considered to be intentional, 'inclusive, participatory and horizontal' (Afkhami, Eisenberg, & Vaziri, 2001, cited in Batliwala, 2010, p. 12), then what skills and values must people in an organisation have to be effective? What values must inform the organisation's policies and the programmes developed and implemented? The literature reviewed in this chapter suggests that while answers to these questions may refer to universal principles of transformative leadership and its influence on social change in communities and institutions, the effectiveness of such leadership is mainly dependent on contextual factors.

As research suggests, engaging local women's organisations that understand the context and women's issues therein and resourcing and supporting them to implement their programming may go a long way towards addressing the factors that inhibit women's participation in decision-making and social change. In addition, interventions that include developing and implementing

transformative feminist leadership skills through education and facilitating women's empowerment and activism enable the enactment of contextual and transformative leadership practices. Such interventions must target various levels – the individual, the institutional, and sociocultural contexts – for transformation; otherwise, any efforts to involve women in leadership are bound to fail.

#WomenNaturalTransformativeLeaders

Good leadership traits are customarily ascribed to men, but women embody transformative leadership in ways that men do not. Research on how women construct leadership and their leadership identities is critical.

Questions for discussion

1. Can you give examples from your context of the ways in which women embody transformative leadership more readily than men?

2. How might we increase conceptual understandings of African women and leadership? What kinds of questions do we need to ask?

3. What role does the 'African women-in-crisis' discourse play in advancing or preventing women from leading?

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