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## Women's Path to Leadership Through Values Work in a Context of Conflict and Violence

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### Introduction

Women across the globe experience the path to leadership differently. In African contexts, female leadership has a strong legacy (Skaine, 2010). Queen mothers have held positions of power across the continent, and ancient Egypt had women pharaohs (Skaine, 2010, p. 345). The tradition of women leaders can be seen to this day, with several freely elected female head of states. Women also serve as leaders of traditional African religions (Odamtten, 2012). In mainline and African-founded churches, women occupy various leadership positions, especially at a congregational level (Ngunjiri & Christo-Baker, 2012).

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However, from a broader perspective, female representation in leadership positions is much lower than that of males (Ngunjiri, 2010; Wakahiu & Salvaterra, 2012), and the situation reflects the global phenomenon of a ‘glass ceiling’ (Adams, 2007). That is, women’s access to powerful positions is limited by ‘social norms, organizational cultures, and structures’ (Ngunjiri & Christo-Baker, 2012, p. 1). Madimbo highlights that the entire structure of religious organisations, including ‘the wall, the roof’, is embedded in a patriarchal culture and prevents women from reaching leadership positions (2012, p. 27).

Given the scarce scholarly publishing on women leaders in African contexts (Christo-Baker, Roberts, & Rogalin, 2012; Ngunjiri, 2010), we wish to understand what values, implicit or explicit, assist and impede grass-roots women on their path to leadership. We ask *how women compete and negotiate paths to leadership through values work in a context of conflict and violence*. Our work is based on qualitative research carried out in South Kivu, located in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Drawing on women leaders’ narratives, we discuss how women engage in values work on their path to leadership positions through education, religious civil society organisations and the fight for women’s rights.

By values, we refer to ‘individual and collective conceptions of desirable trans-situational behaviours, objectives and ideals, serving to guide or value practice’ (see introductory chapter). Espedal (see chapter on values work) defines values work as ‘...social and institutional processes of constructing agency, actions, and practice in organisations’. On the one hand, women face severe challenges in reaching a leadership position in an environment marked by patriarchal values, violence and conflict. On the other hand, contextual shifts (see introductory chapter) brought about by wars and conflicts sometimes offer new opportunities to engage in the society, which, for instance, result from an increased involvement of international development actors promoting women’s rights.

In this book on values work, we appreciate the space for a contribution from the Global South. Studies on women and leadership in Africa over the last decades have highlighted relational skills, collaboration in the community and feminine conducts of care (Ngunjiri, 2010; Njoroge, 2005; Skaine, 2010). These characteristics are also reflected in our data

on how values work is negotiated at the grass-roots level between individual and collective desires. This work complies with the suggestion that more knowledge can be gained from how women, '*the who* of values work', describe their experiences on their way to influential positions (see introductory chapter).

## A Context of Conflict and Violence

The data for this chapter were collected as part of a broader project on religious civil society networks in the Great Lakes region, who serve as partners in peacebuilding processes in conflict-prone areas (Jordhus-Lier, Rosnes, & Aasen, 2015). The project, funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was carried out in collaboration between the Center for Intercultural Communication (SIK), the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR), the Université Evangelique en Afrique (UEA) and the Université Officielle de Bukavu.

DRC has witnessed much violence and conflict in the last decades because of two devastating wars (1996–1997 and 1998–2003). The United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on women, peace and security (United Nations, 2000) acknowledges the serious effects of conflicts on women. The resolution, articulating an internationally accepted value, reaffirms the need for women's equal participation in promoting peace and security. Women constitute a large proportion of the millions of conflict victims in DRC (Jordhus-Lier et al. 2015, pp. 42–44; Kimaathi & Waruhiu, 2009; Solhjell, 2009). In fact, one of the main reasons women is not actively engaged in peacebuilding and formal negotiations is that they are looked upon as caregivers and victims of war (Puechguirbal, 2004; Whitman, 2006). Ngongo (2009) noted that women in South Kivu are not passive but active sufferers of war. Their contributions are often seen in informal settings, such as in the local community, in the family and in the corridors of official negotiations. According to Ngongo, even though women act mostly on the periphery of formal structures, they manage to capture a space and exert influence as representatives of the civil society.

In a war and post-war context, the role of civil society organisations is crucial. Aembe and Jordhus-Lier (2017, p. 3) summarise it as follows: ‘With formal statehood in crisis, Congolese churches and international development agencies are among the many civil society actors who perform state functions in its places, including the provision of social services and various public governance role’. It is against this backdrop that the women participating in this study narrated their experienced leadership journeys.

## Women Leadership, Values and Values Work

Leadership studies mostly focus on power and control and apply theories developed in the West. The voices of the marginalised are seldom heard. Scholars such as Ngunjiri (2010) have argued for the inclusion of non-Western and non-White leadership studies into the Western hegemony. Ngunjiri shows how leadership evolves in various social, cultural and historical contexts by studying African women in Kenya and argues that context matters in the practice of leadership. She sees the meaning-making experiences of African women leaders as tempered by radicalism, servant leadership and spirituality: ‘a context that has produced critical servant leaders who rock the boat without falling out, convicted and guided by their spiritual praxis’ (Ngunjiri, 2010, p. xi).

Between community entrepreneurial leadership and institutional leadership and between compatible and competing values of gender, culture and religion, there is a need to understand the interaction of *the who* of values work. We will address the *who* of values work (see introductory chapter) using women’s reflections of their paths to influential positions in interaction with local communities and institutions. We agree that values, implicit and explicit, are embedded in all kinds of practices and behaviours of life (Kluckhohn, 1951, p. 395). While explicit values are audible and can be articulated, implicit values are silent, embedded in practices, taken for granted and go under the radar of common conceptualisation. Similarly, trajectories of values are implicit within leadership practices in religious and civic institutions, and they are the driving force for when women who seek to influence. According to Kluckhohn

(1951), values play a role between individual understanding and collective considerations of what is desirable and what is good or bad practice. Others situate values as interaction between two sets of agents, such as Spates (1983) who sees the connection of individuals and collectives as essential to understanding how values work operates in organisational leadership. There will be either 'consensus or competing orientations among actors and interest groups' (see introductory chapter). The following discussion is on *how* consensus and competing values are manifested in women's paths to leadership through education, participation in religious civil society organisations and women's rights.

## Discovering Paths to Leadership Through Narrative Life Stories

In 2011, a team of two co-authors (Rosnes from VID and Namwesi from UEA) collected 13 stories of women leaders in Bukavu, South Kivu. The UEA research team selected these participants on the basis of their influence in society. Four of the participants were leaders within religiously affiliated civil society organisations or churches; three within other organisations in civil society; three within media firms; and three within public political structures. The participants were between 30 and 60 years old and represented different social classes, education levels, religions and regions. A narrative life story approach was used to analyse how women leaders themselves explained their journeys to becoming leaders (Lieblich, Zilber, & Tuval-Mashiach, 2008). Participants spoke about their current situation in leadership positions and the story of how they came to occupy it, according to them. Most interviews lasted for more or less one hour were carried out in French, recorded and later transcribed. Excerpts included in this chapter have been translated into English by the authors. The women consented to participating in the project and did not want to stay anonymous in publications. Because they are used to public exposure, they wished to have their names attached to their experiences. They had the opportunity to read through the transcriptions and the first draft of the analysis. In the 13 life stories, there are

several examples of women's values work and how women challenge collective values on their path to leadership. We discuss two of these stories in detail below.

Basombana and Kusinza's stories have been chosen because they align with our focus on religious organisations. Both these women were interviewed when they were leaders of departments of women's affairs in different churches. Their stories illustrate how values work is at play in religious civil society organisations.

## Basombana's Story

Basombana said she did not have a happy childhood. Her mother was only 15 years old when she married her father—a man who was twice her mother's age. A year later, in 1948, Basombana was born. Her parents divorced when she was young. She described herself as an orphan living with family members who often treated her badly. In the end, an uncle helped her go to school. Basombana was an engaged student: 'I was always elected as the leader of the group... everywhere. It was like that—spontaneous; it didn't depend on me'.

She developed her competencies through participation in women's work in church. She was inspired by older women and '...later they also gave me the role of leading women during worship in church'. When she was 25, some women asked her to be president of the women in church: 'They told me "We will elect you as President." I said: "As President? Can I actually lead the *mamas* from all these communities?" And these *mamas* said, "We know you very well. We are sure that if we give you this responsibility, you will manage"'. Basombana accepted the challenge and believes that God helped:

I was the preacher that day, and God helped me so much that when I had preached, all the women were touched by what I said. Even the women that had asked me how I could manage to lead them came to ask me for forgiveness. They said, "Oh, you're the servant of God, forgive us for saying that you will not be able to lead us."

Basombana interacted with the women in the communities, listened to their needs and initiated small projects using international funding. Later, she became the only female member in the executive committee of the church. She also discussed the challenges women encounter in religious organisations: '...we can elect women, but we don't give them the power to act as responsible women. And that really makes me feel bad'. She explained that women need courage to be able to talk to many people and actively participate in boards that often consist only of men:

Every time there was something that needed to be said to the *papas*, they [women in church] said: "You are our leader. You have to advocate for us!" Moreover, I considered myself as a leader, because when I started to talk politely, in the *papas'* assembly, they listened to me. Sometimes they highlighted what I said because they often said that what this woman says is true, we have to implement it.

Basombana needed good mediation skills to appeal to several sets of people: the men running the church, the older women who were sceptical of younger women leaders and the younger women who were more educated than her. She said, 'I was a simple woman with little instruction, but now I'm working with women with university degrees, doctors etc'. Her strategy was to be humble and co-operate without discrimination. According to Basombana, a leader is someone who engages herself on behalf of others. She said women's engagement led to a marked improvement in women's work and representation in the church. They managed to, among other things, establish a department for women in the church. This was realised with the help of heavy lobbying for many years. News about what they achieved spread to other parts of the country and that made her proud.

Basombana has also served as the president of other associations. Twice, she was appointed as one of the women leaders of Bukavu and actively participated in politics. In 2011, she contested elections as a National Deputy. Protesting the violence against women was Basombana's main motivation. Her aim was to promote women's rights:

...They killed those women and they were buried in the forest like that. I was shocked. And, no one wanted to talk about those women – not even the Provincial Deputies, who were in the Assembly. We asked them: “Can’t you advocate in order to make it known what happened to those women?” They said “No, no, no, leave it, leave it, leave it”. So, I decided to try to make it to the Assembly. And when there are incidents like that again, I will advocate for those women.

According to Basombana, women have political ambitions, but they often lack the means, especially financial, to run campaigns. However, she also acknowledges a change in gender roles, with more educated women willing to take on responsibilities.

## Kusinja’s Story

Kusinja was born in 1963. At the age of 4, her parents were divorced. As an only child, she was raised by father and grandmother. Her father taught her to do all kinds of work, including those typically associated with boys: ‘He talked to me. He even gave me the responsibility to organise a party. He told me: “Go and kill that goat”. I learned to slit a goat’s throat at the age of 12’. Accustomed to working hard, Kusinja became a strong woman. Her father believed in her, but there was one challenge: ‘He didn’t want me to study. He saw in me a girl who could help her grandmother with the housework. But he didn’t have the perspective that I could go to school’.

At the age of 12, Kusinja followed her cousin to school. When the teacher asked her why she did not attend school, she decided to start school even though she was much older. She was the best in class and received an out-of-turn promotion to a higher grade because of her skills. Because of her performance, the teachers let her continue even though her father did not always pay the school fees. At school, she was very good in political events: ‘I was in charge of *Mopap*, the popular student event in school. I had to teach students songs about the movement, the songs of action that were linked to our President. It made me an authority, and I started to organise others’. Kusinja was also given the role of Virgin Mary in religious parades: ‘I had my little Jesus, and I was dressed



in a white dress like a bride and a veil, and I had to march very slowly like the Holy Virgin. And, there was a long chain of people in front of me and behind me, and it was me – the Virgin Mary'. The different roles made people respect her:

With all those roles that I played in the community, I don't think it passed without leaving any traces. It started to stir certain things in me. When I presented myself in a group, in church or in village meetings, in the service, I found gratitude. Me, I call that gratitude. I saw gratitude in the eyes of authorities, in the eyes of colleagues.

Kusinza also became engaged in the *Shirika*, the Catholic parish in her village. She was one of the people responsible for leading the Sunday service liturgy. The authorities also nominated her to be in charge of women and development.

Kusinza worked as a teacher at a Catholic school—a job she planned on leaving after her marriage. However, Kusinza cancelled her marriage to the man who had given her family the dowry after she realised that he was not good for her: 'I went through some difficult times because of the separation of my parents, and if I also get married in haste, it will lead to more difficulties in my life, and I will never be happy'. Later, she married a man she loved and had eight children with him. She did not know that he was a Protestant until the day they went to the pastor. Despite pressure, she refused to change her religious affiliation and gave the matter some thought. Eventually, she became an active member of a Protestant church. The church recognised her abilities and requested her to take on responsibilities:

There was a voice there, which had done political events. There was a voice, different from the others. One day they told me: "You, over there, when you sing there is a nice voice coming out. You have to leave the last row, come forward".

In 2003, Kusinza was nominated to become a nation-wide leader for women in church and asked to contest the election:

“*Mama* Kusinza, put your name. Put her name also on the board!”... When you come home, you have to thank God. Why is my name among those of the religious authorities in my congregation? There are others that seek this post, others who have the capacity to do it, but you see that they have given this post to you. And it’s paid, it’s not a voluntary post, it’s a post with a salary.

As the head of the Women and Family Department, Kusinza received many opportunities, including to travel within and outside her own country, meet other women and receive training. Kusinza was a candidate in the political provincial elections of 2006.

## Individual and Collective Values on Education of Girls

In this section, we explain *how* women leaders performed values work in South Kivu. How much agency did they have within the limits of their societal structures? The stories of Basombana, Kusinza and other women interviewed in this project reveal that *education* played a key role. On their path to leadership positions, women engaged in values work in formal educational spaces, hence obtained qualifications. The women leaders, *the who* of values work, collaborated and negotiated gender-inclusive values with parents, families and school authorities in a context of competing values and traditions. Although the right to education for girls and boys is enshrined in international conventions, many children have been and still are deprived of education. In the communities of the women leaders who participated in this project, education of girls was neither an implicit nor an explicit value. The leaders started school at different ages. Their social class and parents’ values determined whether they received an education. Gender roles and the lack of educational structures did not help either. Some were encouraged by their parents to go to school, but others had to find their own way.

Basombana and Kusinza are examples of actors who negotiated values work as their practices competed with their parents’ values. Kusinza recalled being concerned that her father did not want her to study. With

the help of other actors in society, who recognised the value of educating girls, both Basombana and Kusunza received a formal education. Basombana lived with her uncle who let her go to school. Kusunza got her chance when the teacher of Kusunza's cousin learned that she did not go to school. Because she performed well, the school let her stay even though her father avoided paying school fees. In other words, by studying well and by taking on different roles in school, such as being in charge of political events, Kusunza attained a special position within the school community, which led others to respect her. These roles left an impression: they gave her a voice that was noticed.

Today, women's access to secondary education has improved. Basombana notes that there is a change in gender roles because more educated women are ready to take on responsibilities. When she was young, she would sometimes be the only educated woman in a group. What this highlights is that the women leaders have engaged in values work by aiming for, demanding and completing higher education. Women born in and after the 1970s had easier access to university education. However, through their agency, they had to convince their parents that they were as capable as their brothers, to be sent to school. In general, the collected narratives suggest that the girls were dependent on their parents' values and that they had to perform well for their parents to see the value in educating them. In the end, managing to get educated was a result of explicit negotiation of values on the journey to leadership.

## **Values Work Within the Framework of Religious Civil Society Organisations**

Ogundipe-Leslie (1994, p. 209) claims that African men view women as subordinate, especially within a marriage, even though the women may have many roles outside of it. One such social network where women can acquire leadership skills is within religious civil society, as reflected in the data above. How did the participants act to become leaders in church contexts within the frameworks of religion, culture and gender?

While women in general encouraged Basombana to get involved in church work, lead Sunday worship and announce her candidacy for the

executive committee, such spaces call for the negotiation of compatible and competing values with churchmen and elderly women. Women are eligible for posts in the church management as long as the position does not include power. To gain influence within the community and establish a platform of communication, Basombana relied on cultural and gender-sensitive approaches. For instance, she complied with the contextual expectations of feminine conduct, was humble and polite, showed respect to both genders and strove to get along with everyone (Ngunjiri, 2010; Skaine, 2010). She displayed courage, credibility and values work by acting for others, which to her was a leader characteristic. She engaged in projects that were internationally funded to improve community life. Her efforts showcased collective and community values in traditional Africa as well as the cultural knowledge of how survival depends on mutual exchanges across gender and age (Kessel, 2016). Her way of navigating practices challenged traditional boundaries.

Her story is an example of how an individual's values of desirable trans-situational behaviours can counter collective patriarchal values. In this case, the *who* contests the implicit values of subordination through explicit gender- and culture-sensitive entrepreneurial behaviour (Kluckhohn, 1951). By sharing one's understanding of what constitutes good practice and challenging the collective understanding of what is bad practice, the individual manages to create paths to leadership and involvement in the church management. Values interact between two sets of agents (Spates, 1983). Both genders trust and respect the agency of Basombana after seeing *how* the *who* acts.

In Kusunza's case, the church provided her with the path to leadership. By leading the Sunday service liturgy—a space historically dominated by men—she showed the courage and capacity to overcome traditional gender roles. Her familiarity with church work and with leading the Sunday service paved the way to more influential positions.

Both narrators considered human resources as important assets that enable access to informal and formal spaces of influence. Their reflections highlighted a sense of self-consciousness, self-confidence and experiences in church and community contexts that improved their self-awareness (Freire, 2012). They named their own talents: communication skills, the ability to encourage and inspire others and the ability to

gain trust. Contexts that deny women power reflect patriarchal values that situate women in inferior positions (Lerner, 1986); however, both narrators acted with agency in such gender-limited spaces. By deliberately challenging values that preserve patriarchal conduct, such as by taking on responsibilities in church and society, the participants influenced their own situations. Oduyoye (2004) notes that only if women engage in confronting cultural oppression can gender-inclusive African contexts develop.

Basombana's engagement in the church also had a spiritual aspect. She explicitly believed in God's assistance. Her spiritual experience was neither abstract nor distant. Faith in God is a reality that encourages women in African contexts (Kessel, 2014, pp. 92–95, pp. 159–180) as they are 'guided by their spiritual praxis' (Ngunjiri, 2010, p. xi). In many environments in Africa, the church is among the best functioning institutional structure within local communities. It is common to organise women's church work through movements, such as the Mother Union of the Anglican Church in South Africa and the Women for Christ in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Cameroon (Kessel, 2014). Several authors have argued that women leadership in Africa requires organising women's groups and supportive leadership to overcome structures that prevent women from reaching high positions (Fenny, 2019; Madimbo, 2012; Wakahiu & Salvaterra, 2012).

Both Basombana and Kusinza exemplify how female leadership can evolve through support from groups of people within the community. They used available opportunities within the patriarchal structure of the churches to wisely, in the words of Ngunjiri (2010, p. xi), 'rock the boat without falling out'. They acted with courage and negotiated larger spaces for women's influence, for instance, by filling traditional male roles at a congregational and managerial level, such as leading the Sunday service liturgy and being a part of decision-making boards.

## The Fight for Women's Rights

In Africa in general, mechanisms of domination over women prevent the application of equal rights and gender equality. Gender role expectations

of women are constantly negotiated with patriarchal values in any given context (Oduyoye & Kanyoro, 1992). Women's status in the patriarchal society of South Kivu does not generally enable their path to leadership. In fact, several of the women leaders, such as Basombana, were victims of domestic violence as children. For women to be considered inferior to men is part of the traditional social structure. This mindset affects how children and the women themselves are educated. At the same time, the leader narratives in this work also show how recognition from others are crucial to gaining the courage to take on responsibilities. Kusunza was a respected woman in the community, and Basombana was always elected as the leader of the group. Changing the value constraints to women leadership requires long-term values work in the family, in institutions and in the society at large.

For the women leaders, their family situation is either a barrier to or an enabler of their roles as leaders. A woman's engagement outside of the household can be viewed as a good or bad practice and is often dependent on her husband's values. Accordingly, some of the women leaders explained how they had been selective in choosing a husband: he had to be someone who understood them. For instance, Kusunza did not want the same fate as her divorced parents.

In addition to their husbands, women also have to deal with their families-in-law, who typically are not favour of women being active outside of the home. Some of the women leaders had to engage in values work within the family in order to continue their engagements outside of home. We strongly felt, from our interviews, that the courage and self-belief that strengthened women leaders' agency was often in conflict with the collective considerations of what was desirable and good practice for them as women. They told us, for instance, about incidents when they had to oppose their father, a boss or a politician, which resulted in grave consequences.

Women leadership trajectories are prevented by patriarchal contexts. Having said this, it is also important to add that the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action has led to more opportunities for women in education and leadership positions at many levels of decision-making. In spite of war and conflict in several countries, it is evident that some countries have managed to mainstream women into leading positions. This is the

case in Rwanda, which in 2007 had the highest percentage of women in the parliament in the world (48.8%). Many countries in conflict, such as the DRC, have adopted UN Resolution 1325 to guarantee women's presence at peace tables. However, given the ineffectiveness of the state, the civil society plays an important role in South Kivu. Its emergence can be attributed to both internal and external stimuli and the international donor community (Aembe & Jordhus-Lier, 2017). This civil society has led to contextual shifts where institutional environments have enabled new ways to engage in society. By leaning on the universal values of women's rights and challenging local values that viewed them as caregivers and *victims* of war instead of *actors* for peace, the women in the state carved their paths to leadership.

Ngongo (2009) argues that one of the most important contributions of women has been to promote, in communities and in peace negotiations, the issue of sexual violence. In a society where women are deprived of their fundamental rights, many are engaged in advocating for women's rights. In fact, victim accounts of sexual violence, the need to provide them with medical and practical help and making them aware of what happened to them have motivated many women to engage in civil society organisations and in politics. Women leaders who work as journalists advocate through the media and have been awarded international prizes for their work. Among our participants, Basombana listens to women's needs and initiates projects that are internationally funded. She had also approached the Provincial Deputies and asked them to talk about what was happening to the women. Silence on the part of politicians pushed her to run for deputy elections.

In their narratives, women leaders described a woman's status in South Kivu as an enduring obstacle to their advocacy efforts towards women's rights. The participants told us that while women may know what the right thing to do is, they do not always have the power to implement it. For instance, Basombana identified the lack of financial resources as a barrier to contesting elections. It is plausible that a similar lack of finances may be an obstacle for values work and for promoting women leaders.

## Concluding Remarks

This chapter marks a contribution from the Global South on women's access to leadership through values work. The life narratives of women leaders in South Kivu, DRC, *the who* of values work, offer insights into *how* women compete and negotiate traditional and gender-inclusive values in a patriarchal society ridden by war, violence and conflict. As illustrated in the narratives of Basombana and Kusunza, women perform values work on various levels on their paths to leadership. Contextual shifts, due to international influence and an increased role of civil society actors, assist their values work. They strive to acquire an education, even though their parents do not value girls' education. They negotiate and advocate for space for women leaders within religious civil society organisations. They fight for women's rights together with other women leaders. Apparent in the stories was community support for values work within families, communities, institutions and in society at large. This illustrates how values are articulated and re-articulated and are dynamic in different contexts and groups. Women gain access to leadership through negotiation of values and connection both to the international and to the collective's values work. The narrators' strategic choices are deliberate and facilitate access to influential spaces and relationships in social and institutional networks.

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