



# The Role of Education Pertaining to Female Political Leadership in Kenya

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## **Abstract**

Female participation in leadership remains essential to ensure balanced decision-making and public outcomes. However, male dominance and gender stereotypes have been identified as significant barriers that hinder women from accessing political leadership. In contrast, little is known about the role of education in the ascension of women to leadership positions. This study examines the educational experiences of Kenyan female political leaders using a phenomenographic approach based on interviews. Findings indicated that education is an enabling factor for female leaders as it provides credibility, fosters knowledge seeking and decision-making skills. Informal educational activities impart leadership essential proficiencies such as communication skills. Teachers were found to be influential as mentors, while parents facilitated the effective engagement of female leaders in education.

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# The Role of Education Pertaining to Female Political Leadership in Kenya

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## 1 Introduction

“...woman is grossly marginalized by a patriarchal culture which assigns her the sacred and vital role of wife and mother in the domestic sphere. Practically relegated to the confines of the private domain, [she] undergoes a socialization process that celebrates the self-fulfillment of the male while undermining the autonomy of the female.”

This statement from Chioma Opara cited in Eboh (1998, p.333) encapsulates the perception and challenges faced by African women especially when accessing political leadership. Despite this, it is pivotal for women to engage in leadership and public decision-making in order to address gender inequality as well as instil good governance principles (United Nations 2005). A large number of African nations have faced military regimes and dictatorships which have been detrimental to their social and economic development (Rotberg 2004). Female leadership traits which underscore consensus building, information sharing, are the types of leadership traits (Booyesen 1999; Rosener 2011) that are needed in many African nations to counter predominant patriarchal leadership cultures. Yet, African women are largely absent from political leadership positions (Osumbah 2011). An absence which seemingly remains set to become a recurring trend as it stems from unfavourable perceptions of female leaders (Kiamba 2008). It is important to note that while the authors refer in the sequential sections to large blocks such as African and Western societies, there is an awareness of the diversity of experiences and the high level of heterogeneity within those entities regarding in particularly women's status and gender disparities.

Numerous research studies have indicated that male dominance of political systems, culture, economic considerations, threats of violence, lack of educational attainment and gender stereotyping present significant barriers for female leadership in Africa (Kamau 2010; Kassilly & Onkware 2010; Nzomo 1997; Okoiti 2008). Brown (1996) postulated that the main barriers identified stem from the stereotyping of women as less effective leaders in comparison to their male counterparts. Despite this, a number of women have attained leadership positions. For example, in Rwanda women occupy 49% of parliamentary designations (Skaine 2008) due to strong political support, but also to structural changes brought about by genocide and the institutional pandemonium that resulted. Indicative of specific enabling factors present in the lives of female political leaders. Nonetheless, a paucity of literature underscores identifying and implementing empowerment strategies for African female leaders (see Nkomo & Ngambi 2009). Albeit,



African women are faced with a plethora of obstacles when accessing leadership positions this study will emphasise the role of education.

Studies on the educational experiences of Kenyan women, identified various socio-economic and political factors which predisposed education and career decision-making (Kiluva-Ndunda 2001). For example, access to formal education for women on the African continent was restricted for an extended period of time. In addition, the content was used to reinforce gender stereotypes through the mechanism of socialization as well as leaving women ill-equipped for leadership roles (Odhiambo 2011; Oduol 2008). As such, the post-colonial African education system primarily offered options that prepared women for domestic roles leaving them unprepared for leadership positions and more geared towards entry into caring professions such as teaching and nursing (Tamale 2000). A pivotal factor remains Colonial Educational Policies which were instituted in favour of males from major ethnic groups which subsequently contributed to discrepancies in the development of females particularly from minority groups (Kiluva-Ndunda 2001). Tamale (2000) noted that the colonial government transferred their western ideas of male-dominated politics, resulting in the marginalization of African women. Weiss (cited in Tamale 2000, p.10) argued that missionary education during the colonial era negatively impacted African women as it was mainly aimed at fostering home-making skills and not equipping women with skills to deal with Westernised politics and decision-making. This lack of adequate political skills has resulted in women being excluded in public decision making and leadership roles during the colonial era.

Whilst, there have been legacy complications associated with education in Africa, the contention of the study was that education also presents an enabling factor for female political leaders. This premise is reinforced by a study on senior management Sierra Leonean women which indicated that managerial positions were linked to high levels of educational attainment (Walters & Mason 1994). Hence, the educational experiences of Kenyan female political leaders were examined to investigate the following research question: Which role do female political leaders in Kenya attribute to education?

## **2 Theoretical Underpinning**

The Social Role Theory facilitated understanding of gender disparities and was dovetailed with feminist ideals which aim to comprehend men and women's "attributes as both cause and consequence of their positions in society" (Diekman & Schneider 2010, p.486). Thus, this research applied the Social Role Theory in combination with African feminism to better comprehend the experiences of African women.

### **2.1 Social Role Theory**

The Social Role Theory, developed by Eagly in the 1980s, has been used to comprehend gender disparities in political attitudes (Diekman & Schneider 2010). The aforementioned theory is premised on a structural approach to gender relations maintaining that formal institutions such as family, organizations and communities have caused men and women to behave differently (Dulin 2007). Eagly & Wood (2011) suggest that gender roles are designed to equip males and females for their designations within formalised institutions. The authors further elaborate by indicating that socialization takes place in order to promote the skills and characteristics which enhance performance within these roles. Diekman & Schneider (2010) argue that gender roles lead to societal norms and

expectations regarding what being male and female constitutes. When these expectations are narrowly adhered to, it causes both genders to acquire different skill sets further reinforcing gender disparities (Dulin 2007). Accordingly, women are often assigned domestic roles, whilst men are perceived as primary financial providers. Furthermore, Dulin (2007) hypothesised that the historical division of labour fostered gender role expectations and contributed to gender differences in social behaviour, for example females should appear communal, concerned with others, while males should be assertive.

## **2.2 African Feminism and Female Political Leadership**

Western feminism has similar overarching goals as African feminism, largely underscoring women's matters and perceived oppressive structures (Atanga et al. 2013). However, the foremost discrepancy was noted by Maerten (2004, p.3) as the origin of African feminism which differs from their Western counterparts in that: "*African women's roles grew from a long tradition of female integration in collective structures. This is completely different from the West, where feminism grew from middle class individualism and the patriarchal structure in a (post) industrial society.*" Thus, African women's reproductive role and communal appose to individual goals are emphasised. This approach differs from Western feminism, in particular concentrating efforts on women often with the exclusion of men.

African feminism offers a framework to pursue challenges faced by different women throughout Africa, as a means of countering the aforementioned challenges, concerned with aspects unique to the African context, and question facets of African culture without "denigrating them" (Mekgwe 2003, p.3). It is a framework that critiques colonialism and seeks to redefine dominant imagery of African women (Chilisa & Ntseane 2010). With the purpose of highlighting "the power and agency of African women in particular to theorise from their cultures and lived experiences to produce [indigenous] knowledge that is contextually relevant, builds relationships, heals the self, the community and the larger socio-cultural context." (Chilisa & Ntseane 2010, p.619). According to Bádéjò (1998) African feminism envisions gender roles as reciprocal emphasizing inclusiveness, with the intention of transforming institutions and society that bolster gender disparities and unequal power structures (Dosekun 2007).

## **3 Factors Impacting Female Leadership**

The under-representation of women in leadership within numerous sectors has been noted by various scholars (Cubillo & Brown 2003; McCann & Wilson 2012; Sweetman 2000). To better understand this under-representation, gender stereotypes and education are discussed as factors influencing women in political leadership.

### **3.1 Gender Stereotypes**

The patriarchal and androcentric nature of political systems present a significant barrier to female leadership. Lister (cited in Sweetman 2000, p.3) suggested that "... *admission procedures, rules and working culture reflect their roots in Western Europe, three centuries ago, when citizens were assumed to be male and white.*" As a result, women often find themselves in an 'old boys club' and are forced to acknowledge and adhere to

implicit rules rather than challenge them (Sweetman 2000). Foster (1993, p.110) posits that the political structure in Africa remains a hindrance for women as they are often described as being “*one-party, authoritarian, and military regimes*”. To support these structures male leaders often rely on network support and resources largely drawn from tribal and military leaders including members of the elite (Foster 1993). In contrast, women might not have access to such resources and networks, thus inhibiting women from participating effectively in the political arena.

Furthermore, women face a ‘double edged sword’ ascribed to gender role stereotypes, as there is a long-standing and widespread belief that male traits are consistent with leadership (Kellerman & Rhode 2007; Kiamba 2008). At the same time, socialized feminine traits such as docility, place women at a disadvantage, as it is often perceived as a weakness (see Evans 2010). Additionally, women who exercise a participatory and relational leadership style can often be relegated to the fringes of organizations (see Tedrow & Rhoads 1999). Kiamba (2008) suggested that these stereotypes remain inhibitors for female accession and retention of leadership positions. On the other hand, when women attempt to adopt male leadership traits it might elicit a negative response as these traits “*are incongruent with the female stereotype,*” (Klenke 1996, p.166). This is consistent with the assertion made by Dulin (2007) that for both genders to be prosperous they must maintain their role description. Hence, stereotypes of female leaders present an invisible barrier which remains hard to overcome ascribed to the paradoxical nature thereof.

For a woman to overcome these barriers and pursue a leadership role it might necessitate a deliberate choice of leadership over family, opting to delay marriage and child rearing, making the same decisions as their male counterparts but encountering different consequences as societal norms emphasize a woman’s primary role as mother or wife (Kellerman & Rhode 2007). This is referred to as the ‘*social cost*’ of leadership, which discourages the majority of women from pursuing prominent leadership positions (Kiamba 2008, p.14). Kellerman & Rhode (2007) question the extent to which women’s choices are shaped by either society or personal preference.

### **3.2 Education**

Research by Browne and Barret (1991) found a strong association between female education and socio-economic development at both the individual and societal level. In Sub-Saharan Africa this has not yet been realized, with literacy rates being the lowest in the world. As such, 60% of the population over 15 years are illiterate with females accounting for two-thirds (UNESCO 2003; UNESCO 2011). Davison (1993) proposed that gender inequality regarding education in Sub-Saharan Africa stems mainly from cultural and societal beliefs concerning gender roles. When education is not perceived as beneficial by legal guardians or the extended family especially for underage girls it might not be encouraged. Consequently, access to education presents a barrier for African women ascribed to a variety of reasons subsuming cultural norms, high dropout rates of girls in primary and secondary school (ascribed to early marriage and pregnancy), and curriculum deficiencies which does little to prepare women for leadership positions (Mbilizi 2013; Walters & Mason 1994).

In the case of Kenya, the gender disparity in education is apparent as 61% of women had limited or no access to education in 2009. However, access to education has

improved and most children enter primary school with no significant gender distinction (KNBS & ICF Macro 2010). Nevertheless, there is a clear bottleneck effect at the level of upper secondary schooling as 25% of Kenyan women aged 25 to 29 have completed at least an upper secondary education compared to 36% for their male counterparts. Furthermore, Kamau (2008) who examined the experiences of female political leaders in Kenya, concluded that the majority of the participant's leadership skills were developed during adolescence and their experiences of hardship shaped their areas of expertise once they obtained leadership positions. Similarly, Madsen (2007b) found that successful female college presidents were avid readers, enjoyed school and had influential female mentors. Identified educational barriers subsumed inadequate career guidance and counselling as well as channelling of female participants away from science and mathematics as this was not considered an appropriate avenue for women (Madsen 2006). Also, Mbilizi (2013) asserts that prior management experience assist women in handling the challenges associated with leadership. As such, Rosener (2011) indicated that women often work in a volunteer capacity or in fields such as teaching or nursing, which might not present opportunities for managerial development. In Kenya, women are more prevalent in caring professions for example women constitute 45% of teachers (Institute of Economic Affairs 2008).

## **4 Research Methodology**

### **4.1 Research Design**

A qualitative design applicable for the changing and diverse cultural and political landscape of the continent was utilised. A predominant facet of qualitative research remains the ability to elaborate on the perspective and contextual realities of participants (Bryman et al. 1996). This is pivotal as a lack of emphasis on the realities of African women have been a core criticism against Western feminism. Additionally, Wane (2011) asserts that African women are the custodians of indigenous knowledge. Given the position of African women, and in keeping with feminist concepts of listening to the voices of women, this research endeavour perceive Kenyan female political leaders as the custodians and “agents of knowledge” (Landman 2006, p.430) best suited to speak on their experiences of political leadership.

### **4.2 Research Procedure**

Data gathering was conducted in Kenya, with eighteen participants. Participants included in the study were formally designated political leaders ranging from parliamentarians, senators, councillors, commissioners, and a Deputy Governor. Participants' age ranged from those born in pre-independent Kenya to leaders born in post-colonial contemporary Kenya. Since participants were born in various socio-political epochs and went to an assortment of schools, their contrasting experiences fostered by diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds ensued robust research results. Non-random sampling more specifically purposive sampling was used to generate the sample.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow for natural dialogue to occur, as this offered “greater breadth” than structured interviews (Fontana & Frey 2008, p.129). The face-to-face interviews involved travelling to where participants worked or lived, in

and out of Nairobi<sup>1</sup>, and served to contextualize participant's experiences. All interviews were recorded using a digital recorder, except for one where detailed notes were taken. The duration of the interviews was between 30 to 90 minutes, depending on the time available by participants. Consisting of two parts, the interviews included a demographic section which involved collecting information on educational and personal history such as marital status and dependents. The second section involved open-ended questions, largely focusing on the leadership journey of participants, extrapolating on the role of education.

### **4.3 Data Analysis**

A phenomenographic approach was utilized which underscore participant's experiences and involved describing, comprehending and evaluating qualitative data by categorisation thereof into themes and sub-themes (Svensson 1997; Richardson 1999). Hence, data were transcribed verbatim, to gain a comprehensive understanding thereof. The interview transcripts were then read and re-read, observing for questions posed by the data (Merrill & West 2009). Data analysis took place in two main phases namely transcript production, where key concepts were sought, categorised and coded. The second phase involved evaluation and linking concepts, ultimately providing an assessment of a given phenomenon (Rubin & Rubin 2005). Themes were informed by the research question and literature, while being observant of novel themes (Rubin & Rubin 2005). An African feminist reading of the data occurred, reflecting on literature, as well as the researchers' perspective and understanding of the political and historical background of Kenya noting this in addition to the participant's experiences (see Ackerly & True 2010).

As qualitative research lends itself to bias, researcher triangulation was utilized to ensure the reliability of the research findings. Credibility was further "enhanced" when Western and African researchers collaborate and are involved in research endeavours according to Chilisa (2012, p.167). For this study, a Kenyan researcher conducted the interviews and did the initial analysis. While the interpretation was confirmed by a South African and European researcher respectively.

### **4.4 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical clearance was obtained from both the Human Research Committee at the University of South Australia and the Kenya National Council for Science and Technology. Secondly, participants were provided with a consent form and signed consent was given to audio tape the interviews. The researcher explained the aims and objectives of the research undertaken and participants were ensured of anonymity and associated confidentiality.

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<sup>1</sup> The main researcher was based in Nairobi for the duration of the fieldwork.

## 5 Results

The findings reported on in this paper are divided into main and sub-themes. The first mentioned sub-theme education as both an enabling factor, while the lack thereof was identified as an inhibiting factor.

### 5.1 Education as Enabling Factor

Education as an enabler encompasses formal and informal education.

#### 5.1.1 Formal Education

Respondents indicated that formal educational qualifications provide credibility and recognition. Additionally, through the before mentioned, professional avenues could be accessed. One participant reflected<sup>2</sup>:

[...] what I am saying is that education, by itself thrusts you into leadership positions without deliberately thinking about it.

This echoes the premise of Walters and Mason (1994) that educational attainment and managerial positions were linked. Education also enabled and facilitated decision-making skills, encouraged knowledge seeking, and continuous learning. This sentiment was stated as follows:

[.....] Education is enabling when it comes to decision making. Education is also an important factor in policy making because you need to have some kind of knowledge, or skills in terms of knowledge seeking.

*Schools/Institutions:* A sub-theme arising from formal education reflected on the pivotal role played by institutions of learning in fostering leadership skills. As such, the afore mentioned could be described as avenues of socialization, providing opportunities and exposure to different lifestyles compared to what respondents' experienced whilst growing up in their respective communities. Schools often imparted moral values and other instructions relevant for effective leadership, for example, time and personal management which are useful leadership tools. As one participant explained:

Tertiary education facilitates learning through vital interaction with others, thus it enables us to be independent and to assume responsibility underscoring self-discipline.

Additionally, schools provided formal leadership opportunities through designations such as class prefects, and head-girls. One participant indicated:

School provided opportunities that encourage leadership for example I was head-girl in secondary school and at university I was unit representative.

These findings reflect on the formative role of educational institutions, confirming the assertion that adolescence is a 'critical' time for leadership development.

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<sup>2</sup> Most quotes reproduced in this paper have been edited for readability.

### **5.1.2 Informal Education**

This sub-theme elaborated on how informal activities such as drama and debate facilitated essential skills, such as public speaking and communication skills, including building confidence. Capacity building such as political training also served to further develop participants' leadership skills. As one respondent explained:

One of the benefits that I had in terms of my education was speaking at the Kenya music festival, and performing in public. This was very encouraging and enabled me to stand up and address the public.

*Mentors:* Participants identified influential figures who abetted career choices and encourage the completion of education. Two main groups were identified under mentors namely parents and teachers. The presence and involvement of parents and extended family was perceived as an enabling factor. Specifically, support from male family member was essential for continued access to education. As such, supportive fathers empowered respondents by allowing them to continue with school, not partaking in cultural practices such as female genital mutilation and early marriages. One participant reflected:

My father has been very supportive. The effort he made to ensure that when school close somebody has been sent to pick me up or he has come to pick me up himself, it just called for an understanding father who appreciated education. He really appreciated what education was.

This finding remains consistent with the features of African feminism emphasising working together with men to address gender disparities (Dosekun 2007). Furthermore, parents were key figures in the socialization of participants, modelling certain behaviour and attitudes. Participants discussed positive socialization which instilled confidence and built self-esteem. This sense of self-confidence was invaluable to respondents especially in countering patriarchal beliefs regarding women. One participant explained:

One thing I appreciated of my parents is the fact that they didn't make me feel that I am different from the boys. I fought for space with my brothers, but it never occurred to me that I was a girl. [...] My mother really encouraged me not to look down on myself, she would tell me not to allow anybody to step on me.

This finding indicates that gender roles are influenced by society and parents are key agents in the socialization of girls. Thus, in accordance with the suppositions of the Social Role Theory, these findings suggest that it is society, and in particular parents who shape gender roles and expectations.

In addition, most participants identified teachers as role models, motivating them to aspire to greater vocational heights. Teachers also provided career guidance, and encouraged the participants to choice atypical career paths. Sentiments to this effect included:

My teachers were instrumental in particular Mr T, the one who encouraged me to choose law. I just wish I was able to thank him for his contribution.

The aforementioned confirm the importance of influential adults in the lives of female leaders as indicated by Madsen (Madsen 2007b).

## **5.2 Education as Inhibiting Factor**

Lack of access to formal education was the most significant inhibiting factors with relation to education which is consistent with literature. A plethora of other inhibiting factors were accentuated such as patriarchal attitudes, gender socialization, gender roles and stereotypes to mention a few. However, for the sake of this article only education-related inhibitors were dealt with.

### **5.2.1 Educational Access**

Lack of educational access presented a significant barrier especially in pastoralist communities where educating girls is not encouraged or deemed unnecessary. Educational access could also be denied ascribed to cultural practices such as female circumcision prevalent in Nilotic and Islamic communities which presents a stumbling block to education as after this rite girls often marry and disengage from formal education. Thus creating gender disparities and disadvantaging women. As such one participant noted:

Another challenge from my community is early marriages and going through Female Genital Mutilation which is a very big challenge for girls. Many young women don't get educated because of their background and also social issue[s] prevalent in their culture.

This is consistent with the assertions made in literature. However, this does not align with the fluidity and reciprocity of gender roles in African feminist literature. "In, Africa, gender is viewed differently, for example, in Yoruba society, biological function is not a hindrance for trading in the market or for leadership" according to Oyěwùní (1997, p.12). This is in contrast to Western feminism, where gender is a social construct, often determined by biological functions, which define social interactions (Oyěwùní 1997). This contradiction further underscores the influence of culture within the African context on educational access.

### **5.2.2 Life Circumstances**

Participants indicated that women are sometimes unable to further their education due to circumstances such as familial responsibilities which hinder women's educational and career progress. The before mentioned often stemmed from gender roles prescribed by society such as dutiful daughter and sister, wife and mother, pregnancy and marriage. As one respondent noted:

In the African context when you get married as a woman you cease to be from your tribe as you are taken into your husband's tribe. When the other tribe observe you progressing in terms of education and or leadership, they might throw you back to your tribe. It's challenging for a woman to really find her place.



The before mentioned circumstances confirm Dulin's (2008) assertion that in order to be successful an individual must adhere to prescribed role.

## **6 Discussion and Implications**

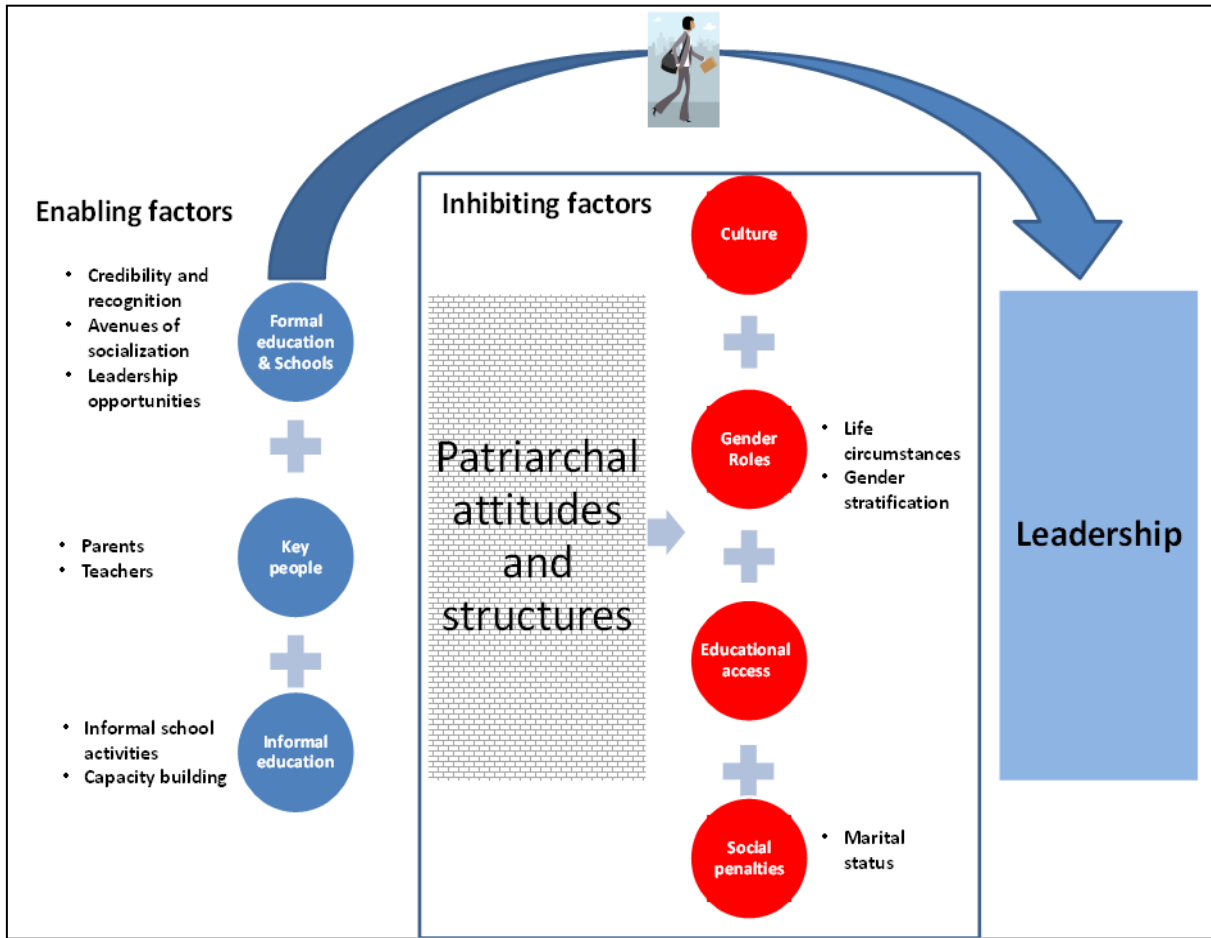
Results presented indicated that both formal and informal education function as enablers for female Kenyan political leaders. As such, education advances credibility and recognition to women in leadership positions. This finding is consistent with research conducted by Walters & Mason (1994), indicating that education influences the social mobility of women. Formal education such as provided at educational institutions created opportunities for leadership, and imparted leadership essential skills. The before mentioned factors supported the findings of Madsen (2007a) who indicated that female leaders were presented with more leadership opportunities at school. Moreover, findings by Kamau (2008) were also confirmed in that female leaders largely develop their leadership skills as young women particularly through challenging experiences. It was confirmed that adolescence is a critical time when leadership competencies are developed. For schools and communities this suggests a need to provide girls with opportunities to enhance and foster their leadership capabilities. This being said, little attention has been paid to childhood and youth leadership experiences. Madsen (2007a) indicated a paucity of literature regarding childhood and adolescent experiences of successful leaders. This is also true for literature on African leaders, specifically female leaders. When considering that adolescence is a decisive period for leadership development there is a strong motivation to conduct further studies regarding adolescent leadership experiences. In particular research comparing the leadership development of both genders.

Findings also indicated that access to education and lack of quality education still remains a barrier for many women. This finding corresponds with many scholars assertions that education ill-equips women for leadership (Nzomo 1997; Oduol 2008). There is a need to review educational curriculum in Africa to ensure that it is adequately preparing girls for diverse careers including leadership.

Based on the findings of this study and a review of relevant literature a conceptual framework for female political leadership in Kenya was developed and depicted in the diagram below.

Political leadership is still considered a male sphere with women often incurring social penalties for participation. Oduol (2008) proposes female leaders should acknowledge and accept their various roles and characteristics incorporating a balanced and holistic female leadership style. This idea dovetails with Acholonu's (1995) various facets of African womanhood which include but are not limited to woman as wife, mother, daughter and queen. The aforementioned author asserted that African women are appreciated for their skill in embodying and performing these various dimensions. It is the view of this research that the re-socialization of young boys and girls through formal and informal schooling would also render positive perceptions of women and girls. This would be an effective long-term strategy towards countering patriarchal structures and gender stereotypes. With this said more works need to be derived from the experiences of African women in the face of patriarchal oppression. This will serve to enrich and broaden feminist discourse in particular from an African leadership perspective.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework for female political leadership in Kenya



## 7 Limitations of the Study

Restricted access to female political leaders presented a significant limitation in the research project. Trust and credibility needed to be established before participants were willing to part take in the research. The researcher spent four months in Kenya, it is proposed that longer time in the field would serve to build trust and give the researcher time to establish connections and work with the researcher’s informal networks in accessing a wider range of participants. Women in political leadership have a busy schedule and even where participants were willing to take part in the study their schedule would often not allow participation. It is proposed that a mixed methods research design be undertaken in future to allow for time constraints and to capture responses from a larger sample. As result of the small sample size the study was exploratory in nature and therefore the findings cannot be generalized to the wider East African and African region.

## 8 Conclusion

This paper has focused on the role of education in women accessing political leadership in the context of a largely patriarchal culture. The paper began with discussing the leadership context in Africa which thus far has been male-dominated. Including, illustrating the importance of women engaging in political leadership and the value of

female leadership traits. This study deployed African feminism to view and interpret the experiences of women leaders in Kenya. Patriarchy, lack of educational access and gender stereotypes were recurring motifs in this research. They were identified as inhibiting factors, hindering women from formal schooling and subsequently leadership positions. Evidence from the study indicates that formal and informal education is an enabling factor for Kenyan female political leaders. These enablers are essential for the future development of women political leaders. There is a need for research which identifies enablers for African girls and which makes concrete recommendations for women's leadership development policy and practice in Africa.

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