PROMOTING GENDER EQUITY: AGENDA FOR IMPROVING LEADERSHIP QUALITY AND EFFECTIVENESS

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to report the findings of a survey study on coping strategies used by senior female officers (Deputy Directors and above in Kenya) in dealing with job related and career progression challenges at their workplace. The population consisted of 64 senior women officers in the public service that had attended a leadership-training program at the Kenya Institute of Administration. The primary data was gathered using a questionnaire as well as interviews. Data analysis was done using descriptive statistics techniques.

The findings revealed that personal factors such as desire and determination to succeed, commitment to the job, academic achievement and good performance contributed to their career progression. Work environment factors that were cited as being supportive to career progression included perceived supervisor support, opportunity for training and availability of vacancies. Coping strategies used by senior women managers to deal with leadership challenges included sharing the experiences with family and friends, having a religious support group, networking with other senior women, using the authoritarian management style and bringing the concerns to the attention of the top management.

The paper concludes by advancing the view that understanding inherent coping strategies used by senior women officers may provide practical ways through which women can succeed in climbing and retaining top positions in their organizations. Based on the findings and conclusions of this study recommendations are made to enhance chances for women advancement into decision making positions in order to improve leadership quality and effectiveness.

Keywords: Gender, women in public service, coping strategies, women and leadership
INTRODUCTION

The subject of gender and development has been received with mixed feelings in Africa because it touches deep-rooted, historical, and cultural values, practices and institutions that have, for long, been held with high esteem. Gender cultural attitudes and religious interpretation exacerbate the gender discrimination. Discriminatory customs and norms, lack of inheritance and property rights, and gender division of labor dictate where and with whom women can live and work, limiting their choice in shaping their destiny in both political and managerial leadership. Gender roles change from one place and culture to another and across time. This calls for a removal of disparities in social, economic, and political so as to strike a balance between men and women as a precondition for improving leadership quality and effectiveness in Africa.

Researchers in the field of gender and development studies have for a long time struggled to understand factors that foster gender inequalities and strategies put in place to deal with gender imbalances. Gender inequality in top decision-making organs of the government is a result of gender bias, prejudice and discrimination, which placed women at a disadvantaged leadership position (Onsongo, 2003). In specific terms, females encounter various forms of impediments which constraint them in their quest for advancement to senior leadership positions in organizations. These constraints have been grouped into six clusters namely: cultural/religion, economic, political, institutional, social and media. Studies on good governance indicate that good leadership should embrace participatory and democratic principles thus breaking barriers that exclude women in leadership through affirmative action would improve managerial efficiency in the organizations (Maathai, 2006).

With the increasing global concern with the plight of women and the girl child, affirmative action policies have been taken to be synonymous with some concrete steps taken by people, political parties, government organizations and institutions to empower and elevate women as equal partners to men. In addition, the pressure to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of gender equality and women empowerment has led to mainstreaming gender concerns in the ministries and establishment of gender focal points such as the Commission for Gender in Kenya, thereby increasing the number of women managerial leaders. As a commitment for addressing gender imbalance, the President of Kenya in December 2006 directed that all
recruitments in the public service would have thirty percent women. While this was a step in the right direction, it is worth noting that a lot of studies have been done on challenges facing women aspiring for senior positions in their organizations. This paper takes the research on gender studies to the next level by identifying factors that facilitate women advancement and how they deal with the challenges that come along their way as they climb their career ladder.

**Background of the Study**

Traditionally women in Africa were regarded as second-class citizens in relation to men, they were expected to play their role in the kitchen: Women were brought up to believe that they had a limited part to play in the management of organizations (Ekechi, 2003). The woman who managed to extricate herself from the domestic bondage was seen to be competing with men and as having no time for her family (Kombe, 1994). However, recent studies by Lutege and Wagner (2004) revealed that few women public servants have made some significant strides in changing people’s negative attitudes towards women managers. They further reported that women devised strategies for solving the constraints by joining a support women group, developing time management skills, hiring house helps and discussing and reasoning with their husbands.

Although senior women officers have high potential to contribute to the social and economic development of the organizations, they are often faced with several constraints. Some of the constraints often cited are lack of opportunities for further education and training, balancing family and work issues, lack of access to innovative or appropriate technologies and adhering to unfavorable cultural and traditional practices that limit their job performance (Cheruiyot and Maru, 2004). Lonstreth and Stafford (2001) found out that although men and women managers are faced with time constraints, women are more affected as a consequence of time spent in household work may have substantially less time available for their office work than do their male counterparts. Other constraints that have been cited include multiple roles leading to stress and adherence to male dominated policies that do not create a level playing ground and enabling environment for women senior managers (ANU-INRA, 1997). Other studies have identified failure to engage men in the struggle for gender equality and the emphases on lobbying and advocacy rather monitoring and evaluation (Omutoko and Ibrahim, 2006). Despite the constraints cited above, a few women in Kenya have made it to the top ranks in the civil service.
Statement of the Problem

Despite all the effort of the Kenya government and Non-Governmental Organizations to put gender concerns on policy documents, the female gender feels that they have been let down as far as representation in the top civil service decision-making is concerned. The fact that women make about 51% of the population, a fair representation in the top decision making arena is demanded (Bunyi, 2004). It is noted with concern that there are only 18 women out of 220 members of parliament. Currently there are less than 19% women in the posts of Deputy Director Positions and above as shown in the table below:

Table 1. Job Group P and above by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Group</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>738</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>960</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>421</td>
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<td>R</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>168</td>
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<td>S</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>145</td>
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<td>T</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>86</td>
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<td>U</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>55</td>
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<td>V</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>100%</td>
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Source: MCS Min of State for Public Service, April 2007(Kenya)

Establishing the coping strategies used by the few who have managed to rise to the top or near top would go a long way in motivating potential women in aspiring for top positions in the civil service. This study is motivated by the conviction that little is known regarding coping strategies of the senior women in the civil service in Kenya.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to report the findings of a survey study on coping strategies used by senior female officers (Deputy Directors and above) in dealing with job related and career progression challenges at their work places. The study identified the profile of the officers, established the perceived personal and workplace environment factors that contributed to their career progression, work related challenges experienced, and the coping strategies used in dealing the identified challenges.
Significance of the Study

The focus of this study is to investigate coping strategies used by senior women civil servants. Therefore, the findings and recommendations of the study are important as they are expected to contribute to the theory and gender balance policy development in decision making in Kenya. The study of senior women civil servants is particularly important, since women face more constraints/challenges when managing in a male dominated environment. In addition, senior women practitioners will benefit from the findings of this study, as they will get to realize that there are coping strategies that may ensure their survival in top-level decision-making positions. Further, the results of the study will fill the existing information gap and thereby contribute to the knowledge in the area of women in leadership and management.

METHODOLOGY

The research design chosen for the study is descriptive survey. Survey method was considered to be particularly well suited to researches, which study the individual as a unit of analysis as an excellent vehicle in measuring for generalization (Borg and Gall, 1999). The purpose of this study therefore, justifies the use of a survey. The target population for this study was senior women civil servants who had attended one-week leadership course at the Kenya Institute of Administration. A questionnaires and interview schedules were developed to gather information on participant’s profile, factors that enhanced their career progression, work related challenges faced and the coping strategies used. Sixty-four questionnaires were administered to the participants out of whom 42 were received back. Data analysis was done using descriptive statistics techniques.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study sought to establish the profiles of the participants, identified the perceived personal and work environment factors that contributed to their career advancement, work related challenges faced and the coping strategies used in dealing with the identified challenges. The following are the major finding of the study.

Characteristics of the Respondents

A total of 42 senior women officers (Job group P and above) from the public service were surveyed on how they cope with challenges in their working places, how they balance work and
family responsibilities, how they feel about their effectiveness in decision making and their suggestions on how the 30% Presidential recruitment policy would improve their participation in decision making in Kenya.

The data indicates that a majority of the respondents 22 (52.4%) were aged between 46 to 50 years, 10(23.8%) over 50 years, 8 (19%) between 41 to 45 years and only 2 (4.8%) aged 35 to 40 years. Regarding marital status 31(73.8%) were married, 6 (14.3%) were single, 4 (9.5%) widowed while only 1 (2.4%) was separated. Among those interviewed only one did not have children. Half of the respondents 21(50%) had two to four children. 10 (23.8%) had one to two children, 9(21.4%) had five to six children and only one had over seven children.

Concerning their level of education a majority of the respondents 23(54.8%) had Masters Degree, 18 (42.9%) Bachelor degree and one had a Diploma. It was interesting to find out that Most of the senior officers 36 (85.7%) did not have any professional qualifications. From the findings of this study it is clear that the senior women in the civil service have high education and work experience. However the high number of respondents lacking professional qualification may be an area concern and may have a negative impact on their career progression.

Concerning the year they joined the public service, sixteen (38.1%) joined the public service between 1981 and 1985, 14(33.3%) joined between 1976 and 1980, 9(21.4%) joined between 1986 and 1990. Most of the respondents 31(73%) were in Job group P and above. Regarding the duration in the job group two of the respondent said they have been in one job group for 7 years and one between five and six years while the majority 21(51.2%) had been in one job group between one and two years. 11(26.8%) between three and four years and those who have stayed for less than one year were 6(14.6%).

**Respondent’s Perceptions of Public Service Presidential Recruitment Policy**

Regarding attempts to increase the number of women in top leadership positions, the respondents were asked whether the 30% President’s recruitment policy would improve women participation in decision-making, 37(92.5%) were positive while only 3 (7.5%) thought it would not improve. Those who thought it would improve women participation gave various reasons. Most of them said more women would have an opportunity than before to participate in decision-making as they reasoned out that more women will hold leadership positions and their contribution in
decision making will benefit more people. One participant summed it up by saying “it will also empower more women because those who will hold leadership positions will act as role models for others to emulate” Based on this finding, it is clear that the respondents are convinced that the Presidential recruitment policy will improve women participation in decision making. Those who said it would not improve women participation gave reasons that the systems always favors men, while some felt women need to be given 50% instead of 30% of the position as a strategy to have more women represented in all levels of decision-making.

Respondents Perceived Support in their Career Progression

When the respondents were asked who were the most supportive people in their career progression, 23 (26.7%) indicated their spouses, 21 (24.4%) children while 15 (17.4%) cited their parents. A few mentioned that their friends, colleagues and their supervisors had been supportive. It may be concluded that family support is very crucial for women to succeed in their careers. The study established that 36 (85.7%) had male supervisors while only 6 (14.3%) had women bosses.

When asked to what extent they perceived that their current supervisors were giving them support at the work place, 17(40.5%) indicated to some extent, 15 (35.7%) to a great extent, while 9 (21.4%) said to a minimal extent. One respondent indicated that she does not get support from supervisor.

Although there was no significant relationship between those who have male and female supervisors in extent of support (chi square 3.099 at 3 degree of freedom, 99% level of confidence) there is evidence that they get more support from female supervisors than male counterparts. Cross tabulation of gender of the supervisor and the extent the respondents felt s/he is giving support at the work place showed that 66.7% of the respondents who had female supervisors were supported to a great extent compared to 30.6% of those who had male supervisors. 44.4% of those who had male supervisors said they got support to some extent and those with female supervisors were 16.7%. 22.2% who had male supervisors got minimal support compared to 16.7% of those who had female supervisors. Only the male supervisors did not offer support.
Personal and Work Environment Factors that Supported Respondents

Career Progression.

The respondents indicated personal factors that enabled them climb to the senior position they were in. The major personal factors cited were: 18(45.1%) working hard, 16(38.4%) determination to succeed and 13(31.0%) being patient. Other personal factors mentioned to a lesser degree were career development, faith, commitment to work and having relevant knowledge.

Work environment factors that enabled them climb to the senior position that they were occupied included; 17(31.6%) good supportive bosses, 12(30.7%) training opportunities and 8 (19%) good clear policies were cited. Other work environment factors mentioned were good scheme of service, availability of opportunities, and transparency in making appointments, good availability of resources and support and encouragement from colleagues. It is therefore, worth noting that women senior officers have to develop the competencies required to effectively navigate the environmental factors.

Workplace Challenges Faced by Respondents

The most three challenges faced by the respondents in their career life were; 27 (21.3%), discrimination due to their gender, 31 (24.4%) work life balance and 20 (15.7%) indicated lack of support from their bosses. Other factors included lack of support from family, lack of confidence, discouragement from friends and inefficient systems in the workplaces.

The respondents were asked how they dealt with challenges they had experienced in their career life. The responses included working harder 12 (14%), balancing work and family responsibilities 10 (11.6%) and ignoring detractors 11(12.8%). During the interview a few mentioned perseverance, focusing on priorities, consulting widely, seeking support from colleagues and seeking spiritual guidance.

Leadership Styles Used by Women Leaders

Respondents were required to indicate the leadership styles women use at the work place. A majority of the respondents 22 (52.4%) said women managers are democratic in their leadership styles at the work place, 14 (33.3%) are authoritarian and a little fraction 3 (7.7%) said Leisseez faire
The reasons given for the perceived women leadership styles varied. Some said that women managers are democratic in their leadership styles gave various reasons for their answers. Five (15.2%) said indicted that women gave other people opportunity to contribute in decision-making while 4 (12.1%) said do this to be accommodate others and 3 (9.1%) indicated that women tend to be too detailed on issues. Other reasons included they act firm but they are fair, they carry every one along with them, they are more sensitive to those they serve and they don’t force things. These finding suggest that women have care giver attributes that they could capitalize on to gain support from staff.

Those who said women leadership styles was authoritarian 12(36.1%) said women managers try to fight back because they think they are discriminated 2(6.1%) they think male counterparts ignore them and they are always suspicious. 15 (46%) indicated they want to be seen are in full control as they try to prove they are good as their male counterparts.

Those who said women leadership styles is Leissez faire said women are afraid to take action and offend staff, they do not fully exploit their potential and they don’t usually make decisions because they are unsure of themselves.

**The Role of Women Leaders, the Government and the Employers in Enhancing Women Participation in Decision Making**

Regarding what women can do to increase their participation in decision-making in Kenya, the respondents felt that they should put more effort in education 19 (40.4%), build capacity among themselves 5(10.6%) while 4(8.5%) felt there was a need to build more networks. Three participants felt that they should come out and fight hard to increase their participation in decision-making in Kenya. Other suggestions given by participants included; making demands for leadership positions and those in leadership positions to support others to climb to leadership positions. Over 50% of the respondents indicated that women should press for affirmative action and apply for senior position in the public service.

When the respondents were asked what employers would do to increase women participation in decision-making in Kenya, 6(15.8%) of the respondents indicated that the employers should be sensitized that women can make good leaders. 5(13.2%) indicated that they should give women a
chance to prove they can lead, 4(10.5%) suggested that employers should hire more women. Other reasons that were mentioned included equal opportunities should be given especially in training, their number in leadership positions to be increased, to stop discriminating against women when assigning responsibilities, implement affirmative action and formulate a legal framework for implementing the Presidential policy of hiring at least 30% of women in the public service.

Regarding what the Government should do to increase women participation in decision making, 4(10.5%) indicated that the Government should implement affirmative action and increase number of women in leadership positions, 8 (17.8%) suggested implementation of 30% Presidential policy on recruitment, 7 (15.6%), suggested provision of training for women while 5(11.1%) felt the government should recognize the role women play in social and economic development. The government should also provide an enabling environment for women to excel, have policies which will place more women in decision making positions and increase the Presidential policy on recruitment of 30% women in the public service.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, gender equity is important in top decision-making organs of the public service because of its implications for the overall quality of leadership and management for social economic development in the nation. Bringing more women voices to the top decision making organs of the public service, enhances principles of good governance that are critical to effective managerial leadership. The findings of this study reveal that women leaders in the public service face many challenges. Although they have the necessary qualifications and experiences, they still have to deal with lack of support from their supervisors, peers, spouses and staff.

The study established that senior women in the public service have faith in the Presidential affirmative action of recruiting 30% of women in all public service appointments. Appointing more women in the public service through affirmative action would expose more women to leadership roles and thus provide role models for the younger career women. However, institutional challenges facing women leadership such as changing mind set, perceptions and attitudes of the public and overcoming stereotyping and myths about women’s leadership
capability is paramount to society education especially that education that target senior male public officers.

It is interesting to note that majority of the respondents felt that they use democratic leadership styles but those who used authoritarian used it as a defense mechanism since they perceived that their work environment was hostile and non supportive. This finding is consistent with earlier findings that depicted women leaders as autocratic (Kariuki, 2005). However from the best management practices, the authoritarian leadership style is not sustainable in present day management where the greatest asset of any organization is people capability. Autocratic leadership styles may discourage staff from exploiting their potential, a perception that would not support appointment of senior women in leadership positions.

Within the development process, gender responsiveness means recognizing that men and women often have different needs and priorities, face different constraints, have different aspirations and contribute to development n different ways. This study reveals that women empowerment lies in their ability to work hard with determination to achieve the required qualifications and experience in order to overcome work environment factors that hinder their career progression. In addition, recognizing the role of networking, lobbying for affirmative action and including men as partners in the campaign for gender equity in public service is critical success factor.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusions of his study the following recommendations are made:

1. In an effort to mainstream gender concerns in the line ministries, government has established gender focal points to serve as catalysts for gender responsive planning, programming and to ensure that gender concerns are incorporated into sectors, policies, strategies, projects and activities. However there is need for these focal points to conduct studies on what has been achieved so far. Findings of such studies would inform policy while setting out a framework that would ensure that affirmative action is implemented.

2. Gender is a new field that we learn as we go along. Making gender strategic intervention policy requires data available is conveyed to the unit of strategic information and to
knowledge before the intervention starts. Studies carried out to address gender disparities in senior public service positions should be made open to the public. The author was not provided with any current studies conducted by the Gender Commission despite several letters of request and telephone reminders.

3. Monitoring and evaluation of progress made towards gender equity is weak. Monitoring and evaluation would assess the degree of compliance with Presidential directive (affirmative action), discover unintended consequences of programs and policies, identify implementation obstacles and allocate sources of responsibility for departure of policies. Evaluation results would be used to inform the planning cycles in the line ministries when mainstreaming gender.

4. Challenges are still present for women who hold senior positions in the public service in that they have to constantly struggle to command respect and loyalty within the workplace. They perceive their work environment as hostile and non-supportive hence the use of the authoritarian leadership style. There is need to have training forum for senior women in leadership to expose them to best management and leadership practices. Such a forum would provide women leaders with opportunities for sharing their experiences/challenges and identifying possible solutions to the challenges.

5. A gender responsive vision requires a careful and expert approach to the cultural entrenchment that has been accepted as the norm. Activism alone cannot achieve the required knowledge transformation. Women leaders, policy makers and other stakeholders need to understand this as a point of departure. Change requires nurturing and this is what women leaders, the government and employers need to understand.
REFERENCES


