

Paper Presentation

**Title: Empowering Women to
Lead Africa's Future**

By

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Introduction

What is Leadership?

Leadership is the process of guiding, influencing, or directing individuals, teams or organization towards achieving a common goal or vision.

Leadership is not defined by gender, but by vision, courage, and the ability to inspire others. Yet, for centuries, women have faced systemic barriers that limited their access to leadership roles in politics, business, education, technology, and community life. Empowering women to lead is not just about fairness, equity or equality/ giving everybody equal opportunity—it is about harnessing the full potential of individuals whether male or female to drive innovation, social justice, and sustainable development.

Why Women's Leadership Matters

1. **Inclusive Decision-Making:** Research shows that when women are included in leadership, decisions are more inclusive, diverse, and beneficial to wider communities hence sustained.
2. **Economic Growth:** Empowering women to lead businesses and enterprises drives innovation, productivity, and economic growth. Hence the adage, Train educate a woman, you educate a nation.
3. **Social Transformation:** Women leaders often champion issues such as education, healthcare, peace building, and social equity, creating lasting positive change. The group that uses most of the gadgets in homes should be involved in developing them.
4. **Role Modeling:** Women in leadership inspire younger generations to dream bigger and break barriers.

Barriers to Women's Leadership

- Gender stereotypes and cultural norms that discourage women from aspiring to leadership. Women are not good in Engineering, hence they are deprived of studying STEM subjects.
- Unequal access to education, resources, and mentorship opportunities.
- Workplace discrimination, unequal pay, and lack of supportive policies.
- Limited representation in politics and decision-making bodies.

Strategies for Empowerment

1. Education and Capacity Building: Providing girls and women with equal access to quality education and leadership training. Increase number of women studying STEM subjects.
2. Mentorship and Networks: Establishing mentorship programs and professional networks to guide women into leadership roles.
3. Policy Reforms: Advocating for gender-responsive policies, quotas, and laws that ensure women's inclusion in governance and business such as VAAP law. Before now, there was a policy on scholarship for all women reading science which does not obtain now.
4. Economic Empowerment: Supporting women entrepreneurs with funding, resources, and training.
5. Cultural Change: Challenging stereotypes and various social cultural norms that impede to thrive.
6. Promoting narratives that celebrate women leaders.

In reality, women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions in many industries including in the global health sectors. There are some historical numbers to chew on:

1. Zero global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, created in 2002, has never had a female leader.
2. One GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance has only recently appointed its first female, Dr. Sania Nishtar, after 24 years of operation.
3. The World Health Organization, in its 77years has had only two women Directors-general.

Many publications has attempted to explain this imbalance- from gender bias to age old stereotype that women are emotional as well as social and structural barriers but the diagnosis also offers the path to a cure.

Former WHO Assistant Director General Dr. Flaria Bustreo and former New Zealand Prime minister Helen Clark- both formidable women- write that organizations can implement reforms, -including through fair hiring process and change in organizational arrangement that embrace gender equity, this includes anonymous bias-free remittent and implementing equal parental leave and flexible working arrangements.

Examples of women leaders around the world who overcame challenges and emerged victorious.

Political Leaders

1. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (Liberia) – The first elected female head of state in Africa. Despite civil war and political resistance, she led Liberia out of conflict, stabilized the economy, and won a Nobel Peace Prize.

2. Margaret Thatcher (United Kingdom) – Known as the “Iron Lady,” she became the UK’s first female Prime Minister and one of the most influential political figures of the 20th century.
3. Indira Gandhi (India) – India’s first and only female Prime Minister so far. She navigated political turbulence and wars, leaving a lasting legacy in Indian politics.
4. Jacinda Ardern (New Zealand)– As Prime Minister, she was praised globally for her empathetic yet decisive leadership during crises, including the Christchurch terrorist attacks and the COVID-19 pandemic.
5. Golda Meir (Israel) – One of the world’s first female prime ministers, remembered for her courage and leadership during the Yom Kippur War.

Business & Corporate Leaders

- Indra Nooyi (India/USA) – Former CEO of PepsiCo. She broke barriers in the male-dominated corporate world, transforming PepsiCo into a global powerhouse.
- Oprah Winfrey (USA) – Rose from poverty and adversity to become a global media mogul, philanthropist, and one of the most influential women in the world.
- Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (Nigeria) – Economist and reformer who became the first woman and first African Director-General of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Human Rights & Social Change Leaders

- Malala Yousafzai (Pakistan) – Survived an assassination attempt by the Taliban for advocating girls’ education, and went on to win the Nobel Peace Prize at age 17.
- Wangari Maathai (Kenya) – Founder of the Green Belt Movement, she championed environmental conservation and women’s rights, becoming the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize.
- Michelle Obama (USA) – As First Lady, she used her platform to advocate for education, women’s empowerment, and health, becoming an inspirational figure worldwide.

Sports & Culture Leaders

- Serena Williams (USA) – Overcame racism, sexism, and health challenges to become one of the greatest tennis champions in history and a symbol of resilience.
- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Nigeria) – Award-winning writer and feminist whose works have shaped global conversations on gender and identity.
- These women showed that leadership is not about avoiding challenges but rising above them with courage, resilience, and vision.

Conclusion

Empowering women to lead is not just a women’s issue—it is a collective responsibility that benefits families, communities, and nations. When women are given equal opportunities and platforms to lead, society moves closer to achieving justice, peace, and sustainable progress.

Words of thoughts

1. “When women lead, societies don’t just progress—they flourish.”
2. “Empowering women in leadership is not giving them a seat at the table; it is recognizing they built the table too.”
3. “A nation that silences women’s voices in leadership denies itself half its wisdom.” Train a women, you train a nation.
4. True leadership is not about gender—it is about vision. Empowering women allows vision to multiply.”
5. “Empowering women to lead is investing in balance, justice, and a brighter tomorrow.”
6. “The strength of a community is measured not only by the men who lead, but by the women who are allowed to rise.”
7. “A world with women leaders is a world where inclusion is no longer an aspiration but a reality.”
8. “To empower a woman to lead is to empower generations to dream bigger.”