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Mulyampiti, Tabitha, Roberts Muriisa, and Catherine Kanabahita: *It is a Long Way to the Top: Increasing Women's Leadership in Ugandan Public Universities*. Dakar: CODESRIA, 2018. 146 pp. ISBN: 978-2-86978-787-2

Reviewed by: Danson Sylvester Kahyana, Makerere University.

### **Methodology and Key Issues**

This book reports the findings of research carried out in Ugandan public universities regarding the extent to which women are represented on various academic governance bodies like councils, senate, and academic boards and committees; it is from these boards that the top class of university management emerges. Specifically, the research aimed at unearthing, as the writers state, “the gender terrain of the universities in order to make explicit the gender gaps that exist in enrolment, retention, teaching and learning environment, research, career progression, organisational cultures, and welfare services” (xviii). Using diverse data collection methods - from survey questionnaires to interviews, focus group discussions, documentary analysis, and on-site observations - the researchers collected volumes of data then synthesized these through a statistical package for social scientists (SPSS) and thematic analysis for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data.

The findings of the study echo the title of the book: while there are some achievements registered in ensuring that more women ascend to the top of university managements, generally speaking much improvement is needed. Indeed, the statistics give a grim picture of how university top managements are male-dominated. At Gulu University, for instance, the supreme decision-making organ, the University Council “is composed of 20 males and 3 females” (p.36). Worse still, all members of the Management Committee of the University – all Deans and Directors of Faculties and Institutes, the University Secretary, Bursar, Academic Registrar, Deputy Vice Chancellor and Vice Chancellor as Chair to the Committee, with just one exception were all male, and only 16% of the teaching staff are females (p 36, 39).

One of the key points that the authors make is that gender inequality in education is a systemic problem that is rooted in societal conceptions of gender roles and women's status in society. The girl child is considered less valuable than the male child, and girls are encouraged to undertake certain subjects (‘soft’ ones like ‘home management’), while boys are encouraged to take ‘hard’ subjects such as mathematics and engineering. Mary Karoro Okurut dramatizes this reality in her novel, *The Invisible Weevil*, where a teacher hired by parents to guide their children on courses offered at high school asks Nkwanzi, a girl, to undertake subjects that will prepare her to be a good wife to her husband (for instance, catering and home management) or a good helper to her male boss when she starts working. Tingo, the brother, is advised to study subjects that will prepare him to be a boss, for instance sciences or law. Thus, by the time women reach university, the scales are already skewed in their disfavour, as very few of them make it to programs such as medical school and engineering school. It is no wonder that at Kyambogo University, women constitute 99 per cent of the communication students because communication is one of those ‘soft’ subjects associated with women (p.30).

The study concludes with the observation that although women's enrolment in higher education is increasing, their enrolment in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

(STEM) subjects is still very low. At a predominantly science university like Mbarara University of Science and Technology, for instance, “71 per cent of the total academic staff in all the units is male while only 29 per cent is female” (p.82).

These statistics have far-reaching implications for women’s chances of serving in top management positions, since the key criterion for these positions is secret ballot elections by university staff. Since the elections take place within the context of societal attitudes and stereotypes that consider female leaders as less capable than male ones, one can imagine what a daunting task it would be for a woman to ascend to the position of Dean if only 29% of the voters are female, and an overwhelming 71% male.

Having so few women at the top of university management is a big challenge for quality education, the researchers argue, because “if women were found in equal numbers and proportions at more senior levels, our universities, and the students studying in them would benefit from the different perspectives and experiences as well as the additional educational leadership and administrative management abilities and experience which women as well as men bring to the table” (14). But it also robs universities of the unique viewpoints that women managers bring to their work, for instance establishing day care centres for working mothers, even when such women-friendly initiatives are usually received with ridicule from male colleagues.

One of the most interesting and touching findings of the study concerns the security departments of the universities. Not surprisingly, the security is predominantly male. At Mbarara University of Science and Technology, for instance, there were 29 male security officers, and only 1 female security officer. This makes female students often feel vulnerable to sexual harassment. The researchers observe that this gross imbalance in staffing of security departments could be attributed to the gender stereotype of security work as men’s work (p.102).

The report provides a series of strategies that need to be adopted in order to increase the number of women in universities’ leadership: (i) affirmative action programmes; (ii) senior women academic task groups (iii) the Colloquium of Senior Women Managers (iv) university women networks; (v) gender, power and organisational change; (vi) organisational cultural change; (vii) strategic planning and reporting mechanisms; and (viii) gender fair education (p.135).

### **The Study’s Strengths**

Any book that aims at promoting equality and equity in society is a welcome addition to human advancement; systematic exclusion of any section of the population from participating in the affairs of that society is something abhorrible. By documenting the different ways through which women have been prevented from ascending to high positions of leadership in Ugandan public universities, the authors challenge the reader to accept this as a matter that needs to be addressed not just because it is a human rights issue but also because having few women in management positions robs the society of their expertise and experience as professionals. If it is true that something dies in every person every time a human right is violated, as Wole Soyinka’s prison memoir *The Man Died* shows; each one of us must join the fight for gender equality and equity so that both men and women have equal opportunities of leading universities.

The fact that the book is written by three scholars from different universities enriches the work by giving us different perspectives. Each institution has particular challenges unique to it, even as there are several of them that they have in common. The decision to focus on smaller universities (Gulu University and Mbarara University of Science and Technology)

while at the same time comparing their situations with that of the larger ones (Makerere University and Kyambogo University) gives the reader the opportunity to understand the gender situation in a broader light.

### **Some Troublesome Spots**

The report dwells so much on the dismal gender situation in Ugandan public universities that when we are presented with optimistic findings, they are mentioned in passing instead of being engaged. For instance, the 55% female enrolment in humanities and social sciences that they report at Makerere University is a very big achievement that needs to be examined in order to understand how this 'miracle' came about. For even in a war, the soldiers count their victories however few they are, instead of concentrating on their defeats.

While the report highlights the experiences of ten women university leaders, it does this in reported speech instead of having women share their stories in first-person accounts. This unfortunately leads to the dilution of this female leadership, as the reader is swamped with quotations from various women, instead of having each person's story as a thorough narrative.

Sometimes the report implies that every criticism of a female manager is because she is a woman. This has the unfortunate implication that, to the writers, women managers are always perfect; they do not make mistakes that open them to public criticism and censure. This is one of the weaknesses of Chapter 6. A manager they quote – a top-flying library professor whom every Ugandan academic will recognize – seems to have been on the receiving end of negative criticism, and the writers do not clarify that this need not be because she is a woman, for male managers receive negative criticism as well.

Related to this is the question of how we explain women leader's under-performance as leaders, not as women. There is a danger that any criticism of a low-performing, incompetent female leader might be brushed aside as witch-hunting, gender bias, misogyny, and so forth. How do we provide opportunity for the possibility that there are times when a woman leader can fail *as* a leader, and when this happens, how do we develop the vocabulary to discuss this leader's poor performance without making recourse to her sex?

There was a need to problematize a number of issues for a more nuanced examination of the problem at hand. Academic achievements are supposed to be meritorious, so when a woman goes for an interview and comes second to a man, how does this fit in the problem that the scholars are studying, assuming the recruitment was fair enough? As we discuss the problem identified by the scholars, how do we make a place for the fact that sometimes a female candidate, even with her vast training and experience, might not be the best candidate for the job? The report is silent on this issue.

Finally, the writers did not consider the political and tribal nature of the newly established Ugandan public universities and the fact that the people chosen to lead them are usually chosen on the basis of *political affiliation*, not gender. If the best female academic leader in the whole country does not support the ruling party, she will not be appointed as Vice Chancellor or Deputy Vice Chancellor of a newly established public university. Even if she supports the ruling party, she may not be deployed in a particular university because she is not an indigene of the area where the university has been built (as a gift for the support to the political party, or as a way of keeping the opposition politicians in that area at bay). The writers of the book might blame me for stating this fact in a hyperbolic manner, but further reflections on this hyperbole will reveal several truths about it.

To the regime in power (for thirty-three years now and still counting), the good academic leader is the one who first and foremost supports the ruling party. If we extrapolate what Retired General President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni said about Members of Parliament

– that better a Parliamentarian who sleeps at his/her job but he/she wakes up at the right time to vote for pro-government (meaning pro-ruling party) laws ( Wafula 2018) – we can as well say that in the political scheme of things in Museveni’s Uganda, better an academic leader who is a man/woman as long as he/she toes the government line. This dynamic of political affiliation inevitably has the unfortunate effect of displacing gender as an important consideration when it comes to recruiting top leaders of Ugandan universities.

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