

## Cultural Influences that Promote Gender Discrimination

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the challenges women face to advance in a leadership position in higher learning institutions in Rwanda. The study was based on leadership and change theories. The underrepresentation of women in higher education leadership is a complex socio-cultural issue that was examined through a qualitative research methodology (Yin, 2016). The sources of data for this study came from individual interviews, focus groups, and document reviews. These different instruments helped in the triangulation of data which ensured reliability. From themes that emerged from the study, it was found that to promote gender equality in higher learning institutions in Rwanda, the inflexible cultural mores that discriminate against women must be acknowledged, challenged, and changed. A new model that integrates leadership and change theories should be developed and implemented to challenge cultural mores that promote gender discrimination.

**Keywords:** *Gender discrimination, higher learning institutions, women representation, equality*

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### 1.0 Introduction

Globally, despite the fact that more women have entered the workforce in recent decades and are assuming an increasing number of leadership positions in the business world, there have been fewer women in paid employment. Societal expectations, employer policies, the legal environment, and the availability of a care infrastructure have been persistent headwinds (World Economic Forum, 2022). This has continued to restrict the educational and career opportunities available to women. The economic and social repercussions of the pandemic and geopolitical conflict have halted progress and worsened outcomes for women and girls across the globe and threaten to leave permanent scars on the labor market. In contrast, the rising number of women in leadership positions in a variety of industries, their increased participation in postsecondary education, and their return to professional and technical positions are encouraging and may serve as a foundation for future efforts. Collective, coordinated, and extensive action is required to generate long-term improvements and eliminate the possibility of reversals. Close and constant monitoring of the gender disparity as a basis for action is an essential first step (World Economic Forum, 2019). Leaders can use the findings of the Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Report, 2022) to identify areas for individual and collective action. Widening work-related gender gaps increases the need for social and worker protection, reskilling and reintegration opportunities, strengthened care infrastructure, and a

more proactive approach to preparing the ground for gender parity in the growing industries of the future (World Economic Forum, 2022).

The main problems women face in attempting to occupy leadership positions in higher learning institutions in Rwanda stem from the cultural influences that promote gender discrimination. If they achieve the leadership position, they report that their voice is often not heard in meetings, and their opinions are not typically respected; that is, the male leaders often discount or disregard their opinions simply because they are women. Furthermore, family responsibilities make it difficult to attend late meetings, travel for work obligations, or have enough energy to accomplish what is required of senior leaders. Besides often feeling fatigued by the responsibilities they have, they also often feel overworked, discouraged, and depressed.

The study provided clear evidence that the overwhelming challenge comes from the cultural factors that influence gender discrimination. Therefore, the most important way to try to increase the number of women in leadership roles in higher learning institutions is to intentionally focus on culture change related to women in leadership roles. Rwanda already has a precedent set for having the highest percentage of women in the world in its national parliament. It seems reasonable that raising the percentage of women in senior leadership roles in higher education is within reach if fixed mindsets about the role of women in higher education can be challenged and changed.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

The specific problem to be investigated in this research is that despite the increase of women in leadership roles in the Rwandan government (UN Women, 2022), and besides the fact that a Rwandan law requires universities to have 30% of women in executive organs of the Universities (vice-chancellors and deputy vice-chancellors), women are still underrepresented in senior leadership positions in higher education (Members of the Executive Organ, 2021) in Rwanda. This study sought to uncover factors that contributed to this gender leadership imbalance so that new ways of thinking about how to improve the representation rate of women in leadership in higher education could emerge.

Specifically, qualitative methodology was used, and grounded theory was the method because this topic was a complex sociocultural phenomenon that needed to be understood. Typically, in quantitative research, the investigator seeks to prove or disprove a hypothesis to generalize the findings to the wider population. The goal of this study, however, is not to generalize, but to describe a complex situation to propose ways of improving the number of women in leadership in higher education in Rwanda. As such, grounded theory does not start with a hypothesis or variables. It is not a deductive study. Instead, data were collected inductively and then analyzed to lead to hypothesis generation or the development of a new theory or model (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to affect a positive impact on the representation of women in leadership roles in Rwandan higher learning institutions.

## **3.0 Methodology**

The particular method I used for this study was grounded theory, which shifted the research focus from testing a theory to generating a new theory (Blaikie, 2007). An inductive method of data collection was employed to explain and understand the phenomenon being studied. A theory was discovered as it emerged from the data (Howell, 2013). The grounded theory methodological approach requires three components: theoretical sampling, the emergence of categories through comparative analysis, and substantive theory development (Howell, 2013). “Substantive theory is generated in specific contexts and is related to a specific social process” (Blaikie & Priest, 2019, p. 144).

### **Sample Size and Sampling Procedure**

The type of sampling to be used in this study is purposeful sampling, in which participants are purposefully selected for their unique ability to provide information-rich data and “manifestations of the phenomenon of interest” (Patton, 2002, p. 40). Purposeful sampling is a non-random sampling technique used in research to select participants or cases based on specific criteria that align with the research objectives.

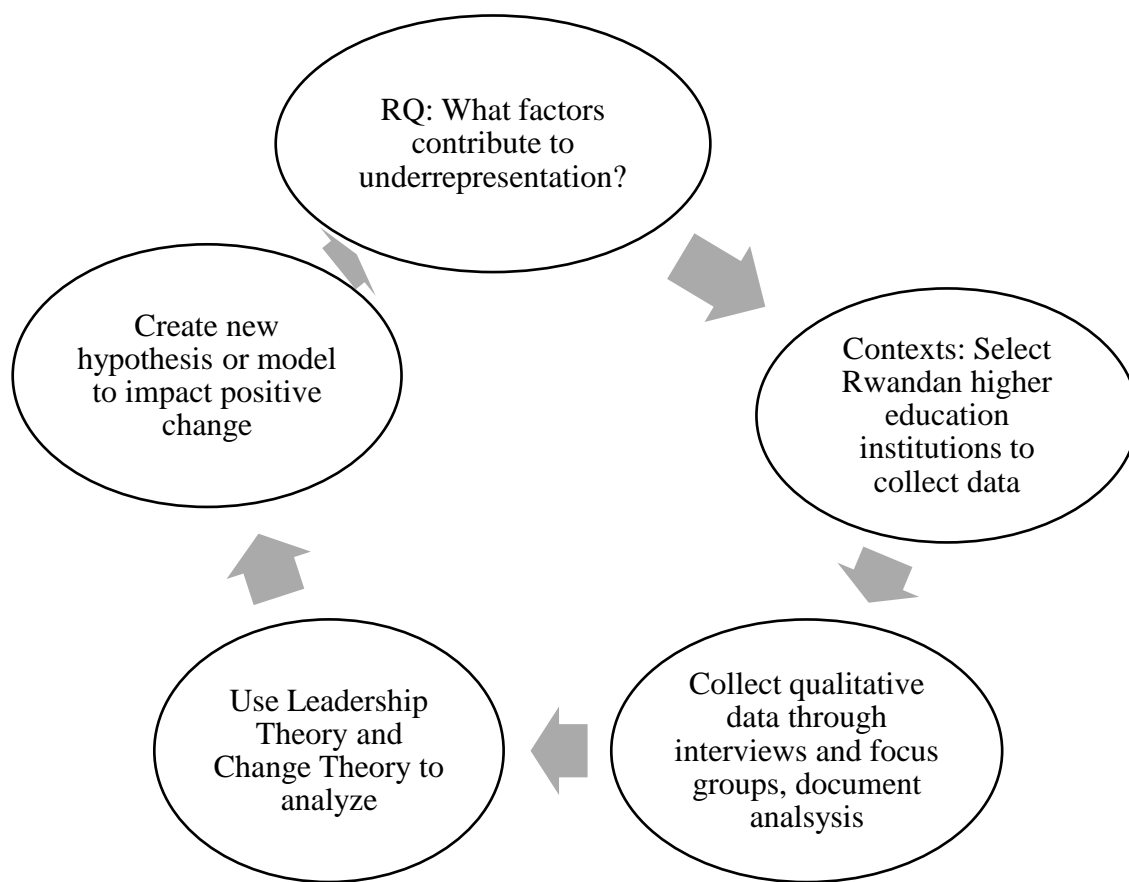
### **Sample Size**

Specifically, I included the only two women who are currently vice-chancellors of universities in Rwanda, two women who are in senior leadership, four women who have earned credentials to fulfill senior leadership roles, but who are faculty members, two men who are senior leadership of higher learning institutions, and two focus groups of five participants each, one of women and the other of men who have credentials to be in senior leadership positions. Interviewing women helped me know from their experience what could be hindering them from leading in senior positions at their universities. Ten individual interviews were conducted with two women who are vice-chancellors at two different universities, two women who are in senior leadership positions, four who are qualified but are not in senior leadership positions, and two men who are in senior leadership positions. In addition to the ten semi-structured individual interviews, I conducted two focus groups of five women and five men who are credentialed to be in senior leadership positions but they are just faculty members. I reviewed documents at each of the five universities. This makes the total sample size 20 participants. I used Zoom meetings for focus groups to be able to reach all these participants for focus groups. I used this sampling method to be able to collect enough data from resourceful participants so that this study can come out with constructive recommendations that will bring a positive change.

### **Data**

Three types of data sources were used. First, six semi-structured interviews of women who are in senior leadership positions in higher education in Rwanda were conducted. Second, focus groups and document analysis were conducted.

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework with the research question, the data collection process, and how theories were used to examine findings to lead to a new model to impact positive change.



*Note:* A Conceptual Framework demonstrating the Methodology of the Study  
**Observations of Collected Data in Regard to Emergent Themes and Key Findings**

From the themes that emerged from this study, it is evident that complex cultural mores that discriminate against women in leadership roles lead to specific issues that women must confront as they endeavor to work in senior leadership positions. In other words, because of the cultural expectations of women, they face problems with work/life balance, accessing advanced degrees, and they feel they have no voice. Since the larger issue is cultural, there can be no technical or simple solution to this adaptive challenge. This first finding that culture affects the mobilization of women in leadership roles in higher learning institutions in Rwanda, was not unexpected. However, the implications of this finding extend to work/life balance issues, opportunity to access higher degrees, and the ability of women to have a voice in leadership roles.

#### **4.0 Results**

##### ***Finding One: Cultural Influences That Promote Gender Discrimination***

Cultural mores and expectations are “central to our identity and the ways we make meaning” (LeBaron, 2003, p. 4). Culture contributes to deeply held beliefs, assumptions, and values from which people within the culture typically operate, whether they are aware of that fact or not. These beliefs, assumptions, and values are often considered to be “right” simply because they are from the culture (Nwuneli, 2007).

The feedback from the participants demonstrated that one of the deeply held beliefs within the culture of this context is that women should be subservient to men. Participant Five put it succinctly when she said “We are in Africa. Men are bosses sitting there” (line 1436). One

participant from focus group two (made up of all women) stated that “Men tend to say that they can't get orders from a lady” (line 3737). Participant Five elaborated on the fact that men are given priority, stating that it is the “...males who have the priority to further their studies” (line 128-130).

### ***The Cultural Mores are Fixed Mindsets.***

The most influential cultural aspect that affects women in leadership roles according to this study is the fact that generally men seemed to have a fixed mindset regarding their position over women. Participant 2, noted that men think that “a woman should stay at home, taking care of children, preparing whatever for men” (Participant 2, line 553). This perspective is pervasive and inflexible, supported by many comments. Participant 3 revealed that “...from our culture, men think that women are not able to manage those heavy activities” (Participant 3, line 687). Participant 4, a man, noted that biological factors such as the fact that women may give birth and need maternity leave disqualify them from senior leadership roles despite their qualifications or abilities (Participant 4, line 1012-1018). One interviewee noted that women sometimes seem to pose a threat to men by saying “I don't know if it is the fight of position or the fight of [the] mindset of men feeling that if they say women are powerful, it is underestimating men” (Participant 4, line 1163). He further stated that “people who feel like if I am going to submit to a woman, I will be less esteemed and that's why people tend to feel like they can submit to the men...” (Participant 4, line 1168). Men tend to nominate men for leadership positions, which systemically hinders qualified women from advancement (Participant 4, line 1200). Participant 5 decried “...we are still in Africa. Men are bosses sitting there” (Participant 5, line 1436). The women's focus group proclaimed that “because our ancestors had that habit of putting down women some women have had always to be submissive to men” (Focus Group 1, line 3729). Participant 9 pointed out that “with [this] cultural background, some men feel that when a woman [earns] a higher education level, that woman is no longer a Rwandan woman” (Participant 9, line 2749).

Some women also seemed to struggle with a fixed mindset regarding their gender roles. Participant 8 noted “...I think that women are not very competitive in the area of academics...” (Participant 8, line 2434). One participant from the men's focus group projected that “with women . . . even going to higher positions is kind of...stressful” (line 3476). Often, women live and work with the same fixed mindsets as men do.

Stereotypes and having a fixed way of thinking about gender is a persistent problem that seems to contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in higher education in Rwanda. One of the male participants admitted that “there are so many with the gender stereotype” (Participant 4, line 999) and that it is because of the mindset of the people.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study led to two different ways to address this challenge. First, and most importantly, the study provided clear evidence that the overwhelming challenge comes from the cultural factors that influence gender discrimination. Therefore, the most important way to try to increase the number of women in leadership roles in higher learning institutions is to intentionally focus on culture change related to women in leadership roles. Rwanda already has a precedent set for having the highest percentage of women in the world in its national parliament. It seems reasonable that raising the percentage of women in senior leadership roles in higher education is within reach if fixed mindsets about the role of women in higher education can be challenged and changed. The proposed model from this study provides a theoretical framework to intentionally begin the slow process of culture change.

Besides the important process of culture change, specific steps that can be taken to ameliorate the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles in higher education also emerged from the findings. For instance, women should be given support to pursue educational goals. That support needs to be in the form of finances and study leave from work, but also in the form of emotional support groups to deal with the stress of studying while working and social networks to build strong professional relationships with other women who are or who aspire to be senior leaders in higher education.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

To sum it up all, it was found out that some people are still stuck in their beliefs and have fixed mindsets about the role of a woman in the society which has led to discrimination against women. It was noted that even when women have started winning bread too as men, they are still expected to do home chores alone where husbands expect their wives to treat them as kings by serving them and preparing for them before they go to work. Women have ended up doubling as bread winners and housewives at the same time which has led to frustration and unhappy marriages. It is therefore imperative for both men and women to change their fixed mindset and be transformed.

## **6.0 Recommendations**

Using mutuality-based dialogue, stakeholders can learn how conversation is more than simply the precursor to decisions, policies, and/or actions. Conversation becomes the action and the tool—it becomes very substance of leadership work. Based upon adaptive leadership theory, people must talk about the complex issues they face. Based on complexity leadership theory, if they can communicate deeply in the spirit of mutuality, new ideas will emerge in an ongoing process of discovery. It is only as people feel safe to explore their deeply held assumptions and begin to critique them that perspectives can transform individually and collectively. The implication, then, is that leadership in the higher education context in Rwanda be understood and practiced more as a process rather than being viewed as a position of authority.

### ***For the Results of Leadership***

Many times, the purpose of leadership is viewed as a function to achieve a vision for an organization or in this case, for an institution of higher learning. The purpose of the process-oriented, mutuality-based leadership that is recommended as a result of this study goes beyond any one institution and targets the larger culture. The results that come from applying the understanding gained into higher learning institutions and the larger cultural context of Rwandan schools will hopefully have long-term, transformational culture change that will transform not only single institutions but also contribute to mitigating gender discrimination society-wide.

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