

# “This Motivates Me to Work towards Great Performance”: Higher Education Female Leaders’ Voices on the Nature of Support to Their Leadership

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**Abstract** Existing literature pays less attention to what enables the women occupying senior and middle leadership positions to succeed in Uganda universities. While support of all kinds to women in leadership in developed contexts has also been given some attention by scholars, little attention has been dedicated to those in developing contexts. The study set out to access the voices of Higher Education female senior and middle leaders on the nature of macro and micro support to their managerial performance. The findings reveal institutional policies, support from senior management, and family support as apparent in women’s successful leadership. The study concludes that despite the macro and micro support, women may not be attracted into leadership because the policies in place are gender biased, males continue to dominate the senior and middle positions, as well as the patriarchal tendencies which reserve leadership for men. The study recommends that, universities should implement gender related human resource policies that are free from bias and continuously organize leadership workshops and trainings for the incumbent and aspiring female leaders. The political sector and the Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development should continue to educate the population on gender roles, responsibilities, rights, and freedoms in society. This may then help to attract more women to take part in leadership including HE institutions.

**Keywords:** support, leadership, women, Higher Education

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## 1. Introduction

There is a dearth of women occupying leadership positions in universities globally and Uganda in particular. Whereas the senior leaders consisted of Vice Chancellors and Deputy Vice Chancellors, the middle leaders comprised of Deputy Principals and faculty Deans in this study. According to Bryman [1], leadership is the process of influencing and motivating others towards the accomplishment of goals. The justification for leadership is because women are underrepresented in senior and middle leadership positions in Higher Education. Mohammedbhai [2] defines Higher Education (HE) as post-secondary education leading to a degree award. Some scholars define a woman as an adult female person [3]. Women were therefore opted for in this study due to their underrepresentation in HE leadership particularly in Ugandan context. The assumption was that focusing on the nature of support in their leadership may attract more to assuming these positions. Over centuries, there have been few women in senior leadership positions in countries such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom, France, New Zealand, Turkey, and Australia [4,5]. A similar trend exists in Sub Saharan Africa. Women continue to be underrepresented; turning HE into being overwhelmingly male dominated.

In addition, there are no institutional gender policies that promote and continuously support women to take up leadership positions [6,7]. In the Ugandan context, women remain miserably few in senior and middle leadership positions in HE institutions [8,9,10,11]. Even with this underrepresentation, numerous scholars on this phenomenon are mainly concentrating on the barriers faced by women in accessing leadership positions [12,13]. Less scholarly attention has been paid on the nature of support rendered to those few women in Higher Education leadership positions to succeed in their performance. The assumption is that the nature of support to the successful performance of those in leadership may signal strong attraction to many others to assume similar positions. This study therefore, accessed voices of HE female middle and senior leaders in order to explore the nature of macro and micro support in their leadership. Richards and Branch [14] define support as an individuals’ belief that they are cared for, loved, esteemed, and valued. Macro support is in form of institutional policies, other senior management whereas micro support is perceived in terms of family.

## 2. Literature Review

Support encompasses policies, support from senior management, and family support as success factors for

women in leadership positions in HE. Institutional policies are crucial to the success of women in leadership. For instance, family-friendly work policies such as; generous parental leave provisions, paid maternity leave policy, and flexible work arrangements for female leaders have been adopted in universities in countries like Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Turkey, the United States of America, and the United Kingdom [15,16,17]. In Sub-Saharan Africa, statutory maternity and annual leaves, crèches and schools for school-age children have been provided in some universities in Ghana and Kenya [18]. Universities have also developed and implemented gender related policies such as the Gender Equality Policy, the Human Resource Policy, the Policy and Regulations on Sexual Harassment in universities in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Uganda [19,20,21,22,23]. Such policies create an environment that respects and protects the rights of all individuals, combines professional and family duties, as well as aiming at increasing the number of women in Higher Education leadership [9,18,24].

Conversely, the recruitment, promotion, and retention policies are gender biased and do not incorporate clear principles of gender equity and equality in universities in South Africa, South Western Nigeria, and Uganda which has resulted into gender imbalances at all levels of leadership [19,21,22,25]. However, having unsupported gender related policies in place may not help to increase women in leadership [26].

Support from senior managers also greatly contributes to women success in leadership positions in HE. In some country contexts, studies indicate that female Vice Chancellors extend support to fellow women and this enables them to succeed in their work [4,5]. Whereas Vice Chancellors have acted as role models to women moving into senior management positions in Germany, those in the United Kingdom have established transparent appointment processes and internal promotion systems which enable female leaders to counteract the influence of 'old boys' networks, challenge the practices and behaviours of doing the academic work and hence performing their work effectively [27]. This trend has also been evident in other contexts such as in New Zealand, Turkey, Australia, and the United States of America respectively [4,17,28].

Relatedly, university managers in South Africa have organized short-learning programmes which help in shaping females for leadership [26]. University councils have also enacted gender provisions which give a clear mandate to mainstream gender in all universities' functions hence increasing women's participation in leadership positions in countries like Uganda and Zimbabwe [19,21,23]. With such support, female leaders are able to balance their family and work related responsibilities hence executing their duties effectively.

Family support also plays a major role to the success of women in leadership positions in HE. Support can be manifested through the fathers who provide moral and financial support [29]. Female leaders are also succeeding in their academic and professional careers because of the support they receive from their brothers, sisters, spouses, uncles, cousins and more broadly the church community [10,30,31]. These family members share responsibilities, provide moral and financial assistance which enables them

to cope with the work-related stress hence performing their roles excellently [15,32].

In countries like Pakistan and Vietnam, female leaders attribute their success in their leadership positions to their spouses who take on their daily activities of the home and children; assuming the role of the listener and providing an outlet for work-related frustration [33]. Similarly, women who received spousal and parental support freely talk to their husbands and are more confident to perform their leadership roles in South Africa, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Ghana, and Madagascar [24,34,35]. Such instrumental and emotional spousal commitments lessen women's absenteeism from work which allows them to focus on their duties hence balancing their professional goals and domestic obligations [36,37].

Despite all the scholarly effort to highlight the documented support rendered to females in leadership, there is still a gap in focusing on the actual support from the perspective of the actual experiences of female leaders in HE in the Ugandan context. The study establishes how the macro and micro support can be an avenue to attracting more women to assume leadership positions in HE.

### 3. Methods

This study was conducted in different categories of universities in Uganda, namely; public (such as Kabale University, Busitema University, Kyambogo University, Makerere University, and Bishop Stuart University, Mbarara), private religious-affiliated (like Uganda Martyrs University, Ndejje University, and Islamic University In Uganda), and private-for-profit universities (such as Kampala International University, Nkumba University, and St. Lawrence University). The study was based on Advocacy world view and drawing on interpretive methods. The study specifically opted for the multiple case study design because it allowed me to analyze data within and across settings as well as to understand unique and critical cases. While stratification was used to select universities, the study participants who were the females occupying senior and middle leadership positions were purposively chosen within each stratum until data saturation. These sampling techniques therefore helped in ensuring equal representation of the population and sample within each stratum as suggested by Tipton [38] as well as providing relevant and reliable information with respect to the objective of the study [39,40]. The senior leaders in this study included; Vice Chancellors, Deputy Vice Chancellors while the middle leaders were the Deputy Principals, and faculty Deans. The population of female leaders in Ugandan universities at the time of the field study is further elaborated in the Table 1 below.

The female leaders were selected based on their level of leadership position, category of their university, and willingness to participate in the study. As a result, the sample size was four senior leaders (PUSL1, PUSL2, PRUSL1, and PPUSL1) from all the categories of universities and nine middle leaders (PUML1, PUML2, PUML3, PRUML1, PRUML2, PRUML3, PPUML1, PPUML2, and PPUML3) choosing three females from each category of university. For instance, where we found

one senior leader (PRUSL1), we got three middle leaders (PRUML1, PRUML2, and PRUML3) in the same category so as to cater for diversity. Note that all participants' names above are pseudonyms. Data was collected from November 2016 to March 2017 using face-to-face interviews and document checks. All the interviews were recorded using an audio recorder ranging from 45 to 1.30 minutes following consent of the participants. Regarding document check, documents such as the Human Resource Manuals and Institutional Policy Guidelines were used. The method helped to provide information which was necessary during triangulation with the participants' responses. The interview method enabled me to access the women voices on the nature of support they receive while executing their leadership in HE.

**Table 1. Population of female senior and middle leaders in universities in Uganda**

Category of university	Senior leaders		Middle leaders			Total number
	Vice chancellors	Deputy vice chancellors	Principal	Deputy principals	Deans	
Public universities	3	1	1	4	5	14
Private religious-affiliated	1	0	0	0	13	14
Private-for-profit	0	2	1	0	8	11
Total	4	3	2	4	26	39

Source: Graduation booklets of Ugandan universities, 2009-2016.

## 4. Findings

The study findings revealed that support from macro, namely; institutional policies, senior management, and micro, namely; family members was viewed as critical to the success of women in leadership positions in Ugandan universities.

### 4.1. Macro support

The interviewees attributed their success in leadership positions to the institutional policies within their universities. All the senior leaders emphasized the human resources, finance, and academic policies. Participant PUSL1 working in a public university argued that:

The human resource policy helps me to settle human resource issues such as; absenteeism, multiple employment, and settling sick leave issues. Finance policies also help me when there is a challenge of people demanding for too much like sick leave. If somebody is violating them, it is very easy to refer to them.

In addition, senior leaders in private universities also acknowledged the importance of the Charters in their universities. For instance, participant PPUSL1 reflected on the university Charter that:

Every policy in this university has to feed into the Charter and it is a guiding framework for all the university functions, procedures, and operations.

Since it is the overriding document on everything, I must refer to it like all the time.

On the other hand, evidence shows that female middle leaders mostly emphasized student related policies including; fees, examination, student affairs, and sexual harassment as critical for their success in leadership. For instance, participant PPUML2 serving in a private-for-profit university shared about the fees policy that:

There is a policy in place regarding students' payment of tuition fees in this university. The policy helps especially when students come to me requesting to sit for examinations before they have cleared their fees. I deal with such students by making reference to what the policy says.

Participants from the private religious-affiliated universities also paid attention to their religious philosophies. For instance, participant PRUML2 emphasized the norms in her university that:

This is a Christian based university and you find that for us, we normally say that we are God fearing. So, whatever I do has to be guided by that and anything out of that you just know that is unacceptable. Like, the way you put on, the way you talk to people, the way you behave generally for others and also to make sure that you perform your duties.

A dominant view from the above participants is that, policies help female leaders to provide the direction for the management of resources including; the staff, finance, and students as well as in executing their leadership roles effectively in Ugandan universities.

Nevertheless, all participants revealed that the support from senior management was critical to their success in leadership positions in universities in Uganda. All interviewees acknowledged that they received technical advice, physical, human, financial, and moral help from the university officers which enables them to perform their work successfully. In relation to senior leaders, participant PUSL2 working with a public university reflected that:

By virtue of their job specifications, different top officers support me. They implement the decisions that are made by council and bring in contributions from their departments. For instance, the University Secretary who is the accounting officer handles financial matters and gives accountability while the Academic Registrar handles aspects of academic matters.

Still in a similar tone, participant PRUSL1 serving in a private religious-affiliated university reported that:

I receive a lot of technical support from the officers of this university like the University Secretary, University Bursar, Academic Registrar, Dean of Students, and so on. They manage their units and then report to me which is very important to me as a head of the institution.

In addition, all middle leaders also reported the enabling environment and an amicable working relations in which they operate as key to their success. PUML2 said that:

There is an open door policy to the office of the Vice Chancellor in this university. I am free to walk in before 5 p.m. and he will listen to me and be willing to discuss my issues. He also issues letters to clear

my students with special challenges to sit for examinations in my college.

On the same issue, PPUML1 serving in a private-for-profit university shared that:

The management of this university provides a good working environment. We have appropriate infrastructure, adequate scholastic materials and staff. This environment gives me a positive attitude towards my work and this motivates me to work towards great performance.

From the participants' responses, it is therefore clearly evident that support from university officers is critical to senior and middle female leaders in Ugandan universities.

## 4.2. Micro Support

The participants agreed that the support from their family members like the spouses, children, parents, and siblings was crucial to their success in leadership except that the middle leaders also added their aunts. This suits participant PUSL1's argument that:

I receive a lot of support from my spouse and children. They pass on anything useful to this university like call for papers, proposals and scholarships. They give a lot of advice and free help. For instance, when we were rehabilitating [renovating] the buildings, my daughter who is an architect really volunteered to provide free service.

This trend was clearly evident among the female middle leaders in Ugandan universities. Along similar lines, PRUML1 reported that her family is her strongest backbone in her work. She intimated that:

I can always count on my parents whether I have a personal or a professional crisis. I am very confident about their social support. They always encourage and give me the love I deserve. They have been in leadership longer than me and so I can call them when faced with any challenge and we find ways of dealing with the issue.

A dominant view from the above participants is that, these family members provide financial, physical, academic, and moral assistance which motivates these female leaders to perform their leadership roles to the best of their abilities in universities in Uganda.

## 5. Discussion

The study findings established macro and micro support such as; policies, support from senior management, and family support as critical to women's success in leadership positions.

### 5.1. Macro Support

Regarding policies, the findings revealed that the human resources, finance, and academic related policies have helped the senior leaders to execute their duties effectively in Ugandan universities. Those senior leaders in private universities also attributed their success to the university Charter. The emphasis of the human resources, finance, and academic related policies by the senior leaders may be because of the level of the leadership

position which they occupy. By virtue of their position, they are the top decision makers and so responsible for managing the human resources, finances, as well as promoting the academic excellence in their universities. The emphasis of leave related policies by the female leaders has also been evident in some contexts suggesting that universities provide leave arrangements such as; paid maternity leaves, parental leaves, and flexible work arrangements for women in leadership positions [15,16,17].

Gender related policies such as; the Gender Equality Policy, the Human Resource Policy, the Policy and Regulations on Sexual Harassment have also been established in countries like South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Uganda. Such policies therefore provide a fair ground for women to compete for leadership positions with their male counterparts [9,18,24]. Even if these policies are in place, women in middle leadership positions are still few. Perhaps, it is because some policies are not implemented and others are gender biased as they do not incorporate clear principles of gender equity and equality hence leading to gender imbalances at all leadership levels [19,21,22,25,26]. There is evidence of policies that support women in their leadership positions. The female middle leaders in this study attributed their success to policies including; fees, examinations, student affairs, and sexual harassment. These participants paid attention to student related policies maybe because they are closer to the operating level and so deal directly with the students. However, implementing policies that are free from bias could help women to balance their personal and professional work [18].

In some contexts Vice Chancellors extend support to fellow women and this enables them to succeed in their work [4,5]. This resonates with the attribution of senior leaders' success in leadership positions to the support they received from the different university officers. These officers bring in contributions from their respective administrative units. In contexts where we do not have so many women in senior leadership positions, support is mainly obtained from the technical and administrative personnel responsible for certain key functions such as the University Secretary and the Academic Registrar who handle the financial and academic matters respectively. Despite the support, however, numbers of women in the high echelons of leadership in Ugandan universities both previously and currently is still miserably low and most of those who are occupying such positions are actually the 'first'. This could probably explain why the current female senior leaders bank on the support from the administrative personnel. In Germany where there are many senior and middle female leaders at Higher Education, for instance Vice Chancellors provide strong support for women moving into senior management positions by acting as their role models and ensuring that women fill up many of the open positions [27]. Relatedly, Vice Chancellors in the United Kingdom institutions emphasize transparent appointment processes and internal promotion systems and this enables female leaders to counter the influence of 'old boys' networks, challenge the practices and behaviours of doing the academic work and hence performing their work effectively [27].

Management also plays a major role towards the success of middle female leaders in Ugandan universities.

The findings indicate that leaders received human, moral, and financial support from management which enables them to make wise decisions and to perform their duties effectively. In South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe [19,21,23,26] university councils have enacted gender provisions which give a clear mandate to mainstream gender in all universities' functions and short-learning programmes have been organized which help in shaping females including those in middle levels for leadership.

## 5.2. Micro Support

Support to female senior leaders is also derived from their parents and this helps them to cope with the work-related stress resulting into better work performance [15,29,32]. Findings revealed that senior leaders succeed in their leadership positions because of the academic, physical, moral, and financial support which they receive from their family members such as; spouses, children, parents, and siblings. It is also evident that emotional and instrumental spousal support has been found to be important in reducing absenteeism, as well as in achieving personal and professional success of female leaders [36,37].

Nonetheless, female senior leaders attribute their success to the support from those family members maybe because they live in nuclear families and perhaps that is why they get support from only those people that they may closely live with. In contexts where women are still few in senior leadership positions, scholars emphasize that women who receive spousal and parental support freely talk to their husbands and are more confident to perform their leadership roles [24,34,35]. Along similar lines, support from family members such as; brothers, sisters, spouses, uncles, cousins, and the church community has also been suggested as equally important to women in middle leadership positions in some Sub-Saharan settings [10,30]. Perhaps, it is because most Africans grow up living in extended families which gives them the opportunity to learn from each other and therefore ready to support themselves within their means as members of one family.

## 6. Conclusion

In view of the discussion, at the macro support level we conclude that even if gender related policies are in place in Ugandan universities, they are gender biased like the recruitment, promotion, and retention policies. In addition women in HE leadership positions receive support from senior management. However, males continue to dominate the senior and middle positions including those of the selection and appointment committees. At the micro support level, although family members provide academic, physical, moral, and financial support to the female leaders, patriarchal and traditional mentalities which reserve leadership for men also sometimes frustrate this nature of support when at times a drift back to the mentality prevails. With such loopholes in the macro and micro support, other women may not be attracted to participate in the leadership of HE institutions.

## 7. Recommendation

At the macro support level, we recommended that universities should implement gender related human resource policies that are free from bias. The composition of selection committees should also either have an equal number of males and females or have more women. This may help to take into account the equity considerations hence achieving gender equality with time.

In addition, universities need to strengthen existing or even create more focused forums, continuously organize refresher courses, workshops, and trainings in leadership that are useful to the incumbent and aspiring female leaders. In such programmes, resource persons should share their leadership journeys and experiences so as to enable prospective leaders to know more about leadership and perhaps increasing their numbers in leadership.

At the micro support level, it is incumbent on political sector as well as the Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development to continue educating the population on gender roles and responsibilities in society as well as rights and freedoms. Women occupying leadership positions should also use the media to inform the patriarchal and traditional mentalities that make people think that leadership is meant for their male counterparts. This may then help to attract more women to take part in leadership including HE institutions.

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