



Barriers to Women's Participation in and Contribution to Leadership in Ethiopian Higher Education

Abeban Yirga Adamu

Addis Ababa University
Ethiopia

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Abstract: Women are underrepresented in senior leadership positions across global higher education and there are different reasons for this. This study examines barriers to women's leadership development in Ethiopian higher education, with particular attention to the role of national and institutional policies and practices. The study used a phenomenological research design to better understand barriers to women's leadership development in higher education from the views and experiences of women leaders. Data were generated from 12 women vice presidents and official documents. The participants were drawn from each type and generation of universities that exist in Ethiopian higher education. The findings reveal that although there is an improvement in women's leadership development in Ethiopian higher education, many glass ceilings remain unbroken. The result also reveals that institutional barriers are considered the greatest, as they also exacerbate sociocultural and personal barriers to women's leadership development. Although ethnicity is one of the major challenges facing higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ethiopia, it is not identified as a barrier to women's leadership development. The barriers to women's leadership are multifaceted and addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach and concerted efforts from major stakeholders, especially policymakers. Unless there is a systemic

response, women in higher education will continue to struggle in pursuing senior leadership positions.

Keywords: women faculty; barriers; higher education; leadership; Ethiopia

Obstáculos a la participación y contribución de las mujeres al liderazgo en la educación superior etíope

Resumen: Las mujeres están subrepresentadas en puestos de liderazgo sénior en la educación superior mundial y esto se debe a diferentes razones. Este estudio examina las barreras para el desarrollo del liderazgo de las mujeres en la educación superior etíope, con especial atención al papel de las políticas y prácticas nacionales e institucionales. El estudio utilizó un diseño de investigación fenomenológico para comprender mejor las barreras para el desarrollo del liderazgo de las mujeres en la educación superior a partir de las opiniones y experiencias de las mujeres líderes. Los datos se generaron a partir de 12 mujeres vicepresidentas y documentos oficiales. Los participantes procedían de cada tipo y generación de universidades que existen en la educación superior etíope. Los resultados revelan que, aunque hay una mejora en el desarrollo del liderazgo de las mujeres en la educación superior etíope, muchos techos de cristal siguen intactos. El resultado también revela que las barreras institucionales se consideran la mayor barrera, ya que también exacerban las barreras socioculturales y personales para el desarrollo del liderazgo de las mujeres. Aunque el origen étnico es uno de los principales desafíos que enfrentan las instituciones de educación superior (IES) en Etiopía, no se identifica como una barrera para el desarrollo del liderazgo de las mujeres. Las barreras para el liderazgo de las mujeres son multifacéticas y abordar estos desafíos requiere un enfoque holístico y esfuerzos concertados de las principales partes interesadas, especialmente los encargados de formular políticas. A menos que haya una respuesta sistémica de este tipo, las mujeres en la educación superior seguirán luchando en su búsqueda de puestos de liderazgo de alto nivel.

Palabras-clave: facultad de mujeres; barreras; educación más alta; liderazgo; Etiopía

Barreiras à participação e contribuição das mulheres para a liderança no ensino superior etíope

Resumo: As mulheres estão sub-representadas em cargos de liderança sénior no ensino superior global e há diferentes razões para isso. Este estudo examina as barreiras ao desenvolvimento da liderança feminina no ensino superior etíope, com atenção especial ao papel das políticas e práticas nacionais e institucionais. O estudo usou um projeto de pesquisa fenomenológica para entender melhor as barreiras ao desenvolvimento da liderança feminina no ensino superior a partir das opiniões e experiências de mulheres líderes. Os dados foram gerados a partir de 12 mulheres vice-presidentes e documentos oficiais. Os participantes foram selecionados de cada tipo e geração de universidades existentes no ensino superior etíope. As descobertas revelam que, embora haja uma melhora no desenvolvimento da liderança feminina no ensino superior etíope, muitos tetos de vidro permanecem intactos. O resultado também revela que as barreiras institucionais são consideradas a maior barreira, pois também exacerbam as barreiras socioculturais e pessoais para o desenvolvimento da liderança feminina. Embora a etnia seja um dos principais desafios enfrentados pelas instituições de ensino superior (IES) na Etiópia, ela não é identificada como uma barreira para o desenvolvimento da liderança feminina. As barreiras à liderança das mulheres são multifacetadas e enfrentar esses desafios requer uma abordagem holística e esforços conjuntos das principais partes interessadas, especialmente os

formuladores de políticas. A menos que haja uma resposta sistêmica, as mulheres no ensino superior continuarão lutando em sua busca por cargos de liderança sênior.

Palavras-chave: faculdade feminina; barreiras; ensino superior; liderança; Etiópia

Barriers to Women's Participation in and Contribution to Leadership in Ethiopian Higher Education

The United Nations world population prospects indicate that the number of males per 100 females in the population is 101.7 in the world, 99.9 in Africa, and 101.1 in Ethiopia (United Nations, 2019). This shows that the number of men and women in the world is roughly equal and this is also the case in Ethiopia, which is the context of this study. Based on this sex ratio it is reasonable to expect equal representation of males and females in the world of work including in leadership positions. However, the reality is far from this, and gender inequality continues to be a global concern (Adamma, 2017; Odhiambo, 2011). International Labor Organization (ILO) statistics indicate that in 2020, females' share in employment and management is 39.2% and 28.3%, respectively. The data also shows that the progress of female share in management in the last two decades is very slow—25.3% in 2000 and 28.3% in 2020 (ILOSTAT, 2020).

Higher education leadership is not gender-specific nor a responsibility given to only men. However, abundant literature and practices show that women are seriously underrepresented in leadership roles in higher education across the world (Airini et al., 2011; Burkinshaw et al., 2018; Chance, 2021; McTavish & Miller, 2009; Shepherd, 2017; Xiang et al., 2017), and Africa is no exception (Idahosa, 2019; Kuagbedzi et al., 2022; Mabokela & Mlambo, 2017; Moodly & Toni, 2017; Odhiambo, 2011; Ramohai & Marumo, 2016; Shober, 2014). This continues in the 21st century even to the extent of raising the question, “can women lead?” (BlackChen, 2015). Although women's representation in leadership is a concern for global higher education, it is more of a concern in countries like Ethiopia where a patriarchal tradition dominates the social and organizational culture.

The underrepresentation of women is evident at all levels of leadership, but it is much higher at the senior level of leadership (Burkinshaw et al., 2018; Mabokela & Mlambo, 2017; Moodly & Toni, 2017; Shepherd, 2017). If it continues at the current pace, it is a long way to achieve gender parity in higher education leadership (DeLaquil, 2021). Achieving gender parity in leadership is a crucial task but aims and efforts should go beyond merely ensuring gender parity because “gender parity in leadership is not only a matter of fairness but also a crucial requirement in the context of the changing higher education landscape” (Cheung, 2021, p. 5). The higher education sector needs to be aware of the importance of greater representation of women in leadership (Longman, 2018; Madsen & Longman, 2020) and the immense contribution of their advancement in higher education leadership for the sector and society at large (Adu-Yeboah et al., 2021; Airini et al., 2011; Kezar, 2014; Li & Kam, 2021), and different educational and financial benefits of higher education institutions (HEIs, Cheung, 2021). Hence, gender equity efforts in leadership should not just be motivated by “inclusion” as a principle. It needs to focus on women's contribution in leadership.

Several factors negatively affect women's participation in and contribution to higher education leadership. Socio-cultural expectations (Idahosa, 2019; Odhiambo, 2011), institutional policies and practices (Education Sub-Sahara Africa (ESSA), 2021; Idahosa, 2019), lack of networking opportunities (Gandhi & Sen, 2021; Yousaf & Schmiede, 2017), limited access to mentorship opportunities (Batool et al., 2013; ESSA, 2021), unhelpful policies (ESSA, 2021), race (Ramohai, 2019; Shober, 2014), work-family balance (ESSA, 2021; Maheshwari & Nayak, 2020);

Yousaf & Schmiede, 2017), lack of confidence (ESSA, 2021), among others are some of the major barriers to women's participation in senior leadership roles across the global higher education.

This study focuses on Ethiopia which is the second most populous country in Africa. In Ethiopia, there are about 46 public universities and 270 private universities and colleges answerable to the Ministry of Education (MoE). In public universities, the selection and appointment of senior leaders involve key stakeholders (e.g., staff, university senate, and board) while in private universities and colleges, it is often the owner who appoints senior leaders. This study focuses on public universities that have a clear directive on the selection and appointment of leaders and managers in HEIs from the Government of Ethiopia's ministries that oversee the sector (Ministry of Science and Higher Education [MoSHE], 2018). MoSHE was established in 2018 with a responsibility to lead the development of three major areas—science, higher education, and technical and vocational education and training. Following the establishment of a new government in October 2021, it was merged with MoE.

In public universities, senior leadership positions include the university board, president, and vice president positions. The board of public universities is the supreme governing body of the institution, and it is established by and accountable to MoE. The ministry also selects and appoints the board chairperson and three additional members directly and the remaining three are in consultation with the university (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia [FDRE], 2019).

The president of a public university is the chief executive officer of the institution. MoE appoints presidents based on the nomination and appointment process indicated in the directive. The term of office for a president is six years with a possibility of renewal for one more term. The vice president of a public university is also selected based on the same directive, and the term of office is four years with a possibility of renewal for one more term (MoSHE, 2018). Although the higher education proclamation and the directive indicate that the appointment of board members takes into consideration merit and gender balance, practice shows that the appointment is more political than merit (e.g., most of the board chairs of public universities are ministers, state ministers, or other high-level officials). Since it is an appointment by the minister of MoE, individuals cannot apply and compete for this leadership position. Therefore, this study focuses on the president and vice president positions, which are selected based on merits and involve the participation of the university community in the process of search and selection.

Expanding the pool of highly competent female academic staff is an important strategy for having more women leaders in higher education, which in turn requires rising the overall access of females to higher education as students (Adamu, 2022). Ethiopia, which is the context of this study, ranks among the bottom 35 countries on the index for offering equal access to education to boys and girls (World Economic Forum, 2021). As is the case among most developing countries, in Ethiopia, the number of female students decreases as the level of education increases. The higher education and training statistical abstract shows that the number of female students enrolled in public universities was 35.5%, 17.5%, and 19.8% in bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs, respectively (MoSHE, 2021). There is an increase in the number of female students in higher education compared to previous decades, but there is still a significant gender gap at all levels of study (Adamu, 2022). Although the government targeted to reach the number of female academics to 30% by 2015 (MoE, 2014), the most recent data show that women comprise 20.4% of academic staff. However, they account for only 3% of professors, 5% of associate professors, and 10% of assistant professors. They also account for only 11% of senior leadership positions (MoSHE, 2021).

Although the development of women in higher education senior leadership positions from practically non-existent participation to 11% is palpable, the figure shows the significant underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles. If women's participation and contribution are to be improved across senior leadership of Ethiopian higher education, greater understanding is

needed regarding the factors that deter women from taking up and becoming successful in senior leadership roles. Therefore, this study aims to examine barriers to women's leadership in Ethiopian higher education which potentially contributes to informing evidence-based policy reforms and improving practices.

Theoretical Framework

This study drew on a social role theory that provides insights into the relationship between gender roles and women's leadership. Gender roles in Ethiopia, like in many other countries, have traditionally been influenced by cultural and societal norms. Historically, Ethiopia has had a patriarchal society where men held positions of authority and power, and women occupied low status and were marginalized from making decisions in different contexts (Cherinet & Mulugeta, 2002; Dayanandan, 2014; Semela et al., 2019). The key principle of the social role theory is that “differences and similarities arise primarily from the distribution of men and women into social roles within their society” (Eagly & Wood, 2016, p. 2). Social role theory suggests that societal expectations and norms shape the roles individuals adopt based on their gender, influencing their behavior and opportunities. In the context of women's leadership, social role theory informs us about, among others, gender role expectations, social norms, stereotypes and perceptions, and organizational barriers. Therefore, looking at women's leadership through the lens of social role theory helps us to better understand barriers to women's participation in and contribution to leadership.

Methods

The study used a phenomenological research design (Frechette et al., 2020; Groenewald, 2004; Van Manen, 1990) to better understand barriers to women's leadership development in higher education from the views and lived experiences of women leaders. In Ethiopia, there are four generations of public universities based on their year of establishment. In 2020, universities were also differentiated based on their mission and focus as Research University, Comprehensive University, and University of Applied Sciences (MoSHE, 2020a). Twelve participants were selected from 10 public universities using purposive and chain referral sampling. The participants were drawn from each of the four generations (three from Generation 1, five from Generation 2, three from Generation 3, and one from Generation 4) and the three types of universities (three research universities, seven universities of applied sciences, and two comprehensive universities). During the data generation period (May and June 2021), there were only two women university presidents with less than 6-months of leadership experience. Therefore, data were generated from 12 women who are currently occupy or formerly occupied vice-president positions. Four of the vice presidents were holding office while the other three finished their terms, and the other five did not finish their terms because of personal and institutional reasons. In terms of position, seven of them were vice president for research and community service, two vice presidents for academic affairs, one vice president for business development, one vice president for administrative affairs, and one vice president for community service and university-industry linkage.

The data from the vice presidents were generated through in-depth face-to-face and telephone interviews which averaged 35 minutes in duration. Semi-structured interviews, which are the most widely used interviewing format for qualitative research, were used to encourage two-way communication and allow comprehensive discussion (Barbara & Benjamin, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The interview questions were developed based on the theoretical framework and literature reviews about women's leadership development, practices, quality, contribution, and barriers to

women's leadership. To ensure confidentiality, participants were identified using abbreviations followed by numbers (e.g., VP2B). The abbreviation (i.e., VP) indicates the interviewee's leadership position; the number indicates the interviewee, and the letter at the end indicates the respective university.

Data were also collected through document review. Publicly available official government policy and strategy documents such as the gender strategy for the education and training sector, the higher education proclamation, the higher education policy and strategy, the directive on the selection and appointment of leaders and managers in HEIs in Ethiopia, the higher education and training statistical abstract series, the science, and higher education and training sector's 10-year development plan were consulted.

Reflexive thematic analysis is a very helpful approach to better understanding people's experiences, views, opinions, and perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Terry & Hayfield, 2020). Accordingly, this study used reflexive thematic analysis to explore the perceptions, views, and experiences of women senior leaders regarding women's leadership in higher education in Ethiopia. Data generated from these documents were used to substantiate the data findings obtained through interviews.

The data were analyzed by the author who has been working in Ethiopian higher education for two decades as a teacher, researcher, and mid-level leader. Qualitative researchers, as human beings, have certain opinions and beliefs about the topic, and it is a challenge for them to remain neutral or objective (Mehra, 2002). I attempted to reduce the effect of my bias on the study by suspending my own experience as a mid-level leader and taken-for-granted beliefs and opinions about the topic at every step of the research process.

Findings

The study identified several factors that deter women's participation and overall effectiveness in leadership roles in higher education and these are categorized into three major barriers—institutional, sociocultural, and personal barriers.

Institutional Barriers

The study identified several specific institutional barriers to women's leadership in Ethiopian higher education, and the following are the major ones.

Policies and Strategies

Women bring important perspectives, attributes, and skills to leadership in higher education, but they have not been given enough opportunities in senior leadership roles. Governments can empower women's leadership by developing and implementing policies and strategies that help to overcome barriers to women's leadership development and participation (Hoare & Gell, 2009). In Ethiopia, recently emphasis has been given to gender equality and equity in different national policies. For example, the government's 10 years development plan (2021-2030) plans to make Ethiopia the Centre of African's Female Leaders by producing 10,000 capable female leaders" (FDRE, 2020, p. 64). The gender strategy for education and training sector also states that "equitable distribution of teaching and leadership roles between men and women should be a de facto democratic exercise within our education and training system" (MoE, 2014, p. 29). Some HEIs also have put policies in place to attain gender equity and equality which is very important because institutional policies and strategies guide what universities will do in the short and long term. However, participants indicated that HEIs are unable/unwilling to implement existing national and institutional policies, and there is no consequence as a result of this.

There is also a lack of institutional policies that promote and guide women's participation in leadership roles in higher education. One of the research participants said, "Universities should have a policy that clearly shows their commitment to women's leadership development plan. As far as I know, this is not available and leadership development is no one's concern" (VP6C). Therefore, a lack of institutional policy in leadership and a lack of implementation of policies and strategies that advocate gender equity and equality were identified as some of the factors that deter women's leadership development in higher education.

Different policies and calls for applications also always state that "women are encouraged" to apply and assume leadership roles. However, participants indicated that this is also purely tokenism that has no real intention and applicability.

The government, the ministry, universities, everyone says women are encouraged. I am tired of this lip service. I don't know how we are encouraged and there is no encouragement strategy for women to take up leadership roles. Sometimes they are putting "women are encouraged" as a standard format of a call for application. (VP5D)

This clearly shows that although the government and HEIs talk about women's empowerment and engagement, in practice, there is a lack of commitment to women's leadership development. Study indicates that this is also the case in HEIs within and outside Africa (Idahosa, 2019).

"Merit-Based" Selection and Appointment

Until 2016, senior leadership appointment in universities was mainly based on locality and to some extent political affiliation (Adamu, 2019). As a result, most senior leadership positions are occupied by academics who have no or limited skills and practical experiences in leadership. Even in such a context, women were not preferred to take up senior leadership roles because, "in addition to the general problem of seeing and accepting women in senior leadership, most female academic staff was also less politically affiliated compared to their male counterparts" (Adamu, 2022, p. 48). In 2017, MoE developed a directive on the selection and appointment of leaders and managers in HEIs. The "merit-based" selection and appointment processes for senior leadership positions, which appear to be neutral, were critiqued by research participants for being subtly gendered. The challenge with meritocratic selection and appointment directive is it suggests that women compete on equal terms with men and it assumes a level playing field. In a patriarchal society like Ethiopia, women have more responsibility than men to take care of children and families. Their career development is also potentially interrupted by pregnancy, birth, and the like, which means they need more time than men to achieve the required "merit". In such a context, selecting and appointing leaders based on merit only, which includes educational qualification or academic rank and experience (which account for at least 50% of the selection criteria), serves only to confirm the status quo (Adamu, 2019). About this, research participants said the following:

The ministry needs to be commended for developing a directive that abolishes leadership appointments based on ethnicity and other unclear criteria. However, the directive has its limitations including gender blindness. (VP7E)

The directive does not take into consideration the challenges that we [women] are facing in universities and society. Everyone knows that for many reasons women lack leadership experience and it takes them more time to reach different academic ranks, but in the directive, these are major criteria with a high point. (VP5D)

To address some of the gender-related and other issues, the directive was revised in 2018. However, some of the changes that aim to promote women's participation in senior leadership roles are not feasible. For example, the revised directive states that every university shall have at least two women in senior leadership positions (MoSHE, 2018). A couple of participants indicated that the quota approach is an ad hoc solution to redress the gender imbalance in leadership, but most of them were not in favor of the quota system because women who came through this process will have less acceptability, which negatively affects their roles as leaders. Moreover, the practice also indicates that, thus far, no university has implemented the quota approach. This also indicates the difficulty to entertain a quota system in a "merit-based" selection and appointment process.

The dearth of women in senior leadership positions in higher education is a phenomenon not only limited to the Ethiopian context. Setting up equal criteria for men and women in a context where there is no equal playing ground seems to run against efforts to promote gender diversity and equity in leadership. The "merit-based" approach to the selection and appointment of senior leaders is also identified as one of the factors that drive the underrepresentation of women in leadership. It limits female academics' voices in important decision-making processes and deprives female students and academics of strong role models, which are important to women's leadership participation.

Unfair Expectations and Lack of Recognition and Appreciation

Research participants indicated that they are expected to work twice as much as men to prove they are competent leaders. They also noted that it is not easy for them to get recognition and appreciation like their male counterparts for the level and amount of work they do. This is similar to women university leaders in India (Gandhi & Sen, 2020) and other African countries (Idahosa, 2019; Mabokela & Mlambo, 2014; Petersen & Gravett, 2000), where they are made to prove themselves twice as worthy. The following remarks from the research participants reflect the unfair expectations faced by women leaders:

I don't know why universities expect us to do more to prove ourselves. We are not unique or exceptionally talented. This pressures us to unfairly spend more time to meet expectations and frustrates us in assuming leadership roles. What is more disappointing is that regardless of how great we [women] are in leadership; the male-dominated system does not recognize and appreciate our hard work. On the contrary, it is very fast to pinpoint and loud our mistakes and weaknesses. (VP6C)

The higher education community and society expect a lot more from women than men leaders. Because they think that you cannot perform at that level. So, we need to work three or four times more than men to prove that we can do as equal to or better than men in leadership. It is unfair to expect us to do more to a higher standard than men. This is very exhausting and frustrating to work in such an environment. (VP1A)

These excerpts show that women leaders' mistakes and weaknesses are magnified, but their good performances are not praised and recognized. Previous studies also indicate that women leaders face higher standards (Catalyst, 2007), lower rewards, and less acceptance compared to male leaders across the globe, and this is higher in developing countries compared to developed countries (Maheshwari & Rajkishore, 2020). The huge workload, unfounded high expectations, and demeaning hard work and achievement coupled with other personal and societal factors discourage women from taking up leadership roles and becoming successful leaders.

Sexist Practices

The first unfavorable practice is related to mere representation. In the Ethiopian higher education context, three major factors motivated women to take senior leadership roles. These include the ambition to address the problem they see and face, the determination to prove their leadership capacity, and the encouragement of a few colleagues and leaders (Adamu, 2022). However, participants indicated that most men senior leaders consider women's presence as tokenism—representation and political correctness. Therefore, they don't expect women to be critical and come up with new or innovative ideas and challenge ideas. They also don't want them to be influential and heard equally. Research participants also said that,

When you bring new ideas or different perspectives related to the issue under discussion, some of them [male senior management teams] try to ridicule your idea. Very often, your idea gets acceptance when a vocal senior leader said it differently. Unfortunately, this is how it works, and when you know this, you lose confidence and interest to actively engage in discussions even though you know you can contribute a lot. (VP5D)

It is very difficult to be the only women senior leader in a university. Several practices made me feel bad and cursed the day that I decided to take up this position. ...The university senate members are happier with my physical presence than with my contributions. I think they won't be surprised if I didn't say a word in our consecutive management meetings because that is what they want and expect. If I logically present or defend my idea or opinion, they often label me as aggressive or too hard to talk to. (VP12J)

Women are not often welcomed to this [senior leadership] position. Men leaders often do not listen to and accept what is proposed by women leaders, because they assume that we are there just for the sake of gender representation. They expect us to listen to their discussion and approve. Sometimes they even completely ignore my presence. This is very humiliating and makes working with these people very difficult. (VP4H)

These excerpts emphasized how difficult it is to express one's ideas in a male-dominated leadership team. This resonates with the finding of the Catalyst (2007) report where women leaders are often perceived as "too soft or too tough but never just right".

The second unfavorable practice is related to ignorance. There was a time when a good number of highly qualified women were lacking in the higher education system. Research participants argued that now there is a good number of highly qualified women academics who could be selected and appointed as senior leaders. However, they indicated that men senior leaders at national and institutional levels ignore this fact and continued providing the same outdated reason for the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions—lack of qualified women. Participants also said,

There are several reasons that higher education leaders list for the small number of women leaders, but more than anything else, it is really painful when they still say "there is a lack of qualified females" who can be a leader. For me, questioning both our qualifications and existence is cynicism and an insult. (VP1A)

...I don't get what they expect and want from us. We are educated in the way they are educated. We have equal qualifications compared to what some of them have. Yes, we have less leadership experience and this is justifiable. So, I don't know why

they keep saying there is a lack of competent women academic staff to assume senior leadership positions. ...In the last two decades, we have seen many men academic staff taking up senior leadership positions without having high qualifications or whatever criteria they are talking about. Why is it tough when it comes to women? I don't get it. (VP8B)

The available data also support the participants' argument. The directive for selection and appointment of senior leaders requires the highest educational qualification (i.e., Ph.D. degree or equivalent). It also allows academic staff with master's degrees to compete with exceptions. The other major criteria are teaching and learning experiences coupled with leadership experiences at different levels. The three years' statistic (2017/18-2019/20) shows that about 12.4% of women academic staff have master's and Ph.D. degrees. Moreover, among mid-level leaders, 11% of them are women (MoSHE, 2021). These indicate that except for leadership experience, which women lack compared to men, there is a good number of women academics who could assume senior leadership roles. However, this number is not evenly distributed across universities, and most qualified and experienced women are found in first and second-generation universities than in third and fourth-generation universities.

The third unfavorable practice is related to firing women leaders with no clear reason or for defending their ideas. Leaders could leave their position before the end of their leadership term, either due to their own request or because they were terminated by the university for a justifiable reason. However, some women senior leaders argued that they were removed from their positions without justifiable reasons or formal communication.

I heard that I am relieved of my post from other people who saw the letter on social media. It was very disrespectful. I didn't know that and I was working and signing letters that day. I still didn't know why I was fired and it is not indicated in the letter either. (VP3I)

In the management meeting, I reflected on and objected to the endorsement of a proposed directive, mainly regarding issues that I thought were against professional integrity. The president was not happy about my firm stance which I still stand for. After a few days, I was told that I am relieved of my position as vice president. (VP5D)

Some of the research participants in other universities knew about these decisions and described the impact on their own leadership roles and self-confidence. This implies that although such measures are not unique only to women leaders, they have significant negative effects on the performance and confidence of other incumbent women senior leaders. And yet, some argued that women should be determined to continue in their position regardless of the unfavorable practice. According to this argument, the presence of women leaders has at least symbolic importance for female academics, as it demonstrates that women can reach senior leadership positions in higher education (White, 2003) and work in a challenging environment.

A Mismatch Between Expectation and Reality

Establishing a welcoming environment is an important aspect of fostering women's leadership engagement. Most research participants also expected a welcoming and supportive environment that contributes to their leadership effectiveness, for example, an induction program, welcome and support from the university community and the top management, and opportunities to enhance leadership capacity. However, in most cases, the reality was not as they expected.

The environment was not hostile, but not welcoming and supportive either. ...I was expecting other vice presidents and the president to guide and support me at least until I am well familiar with the system, but that was not the case and I was so frustrated and felt lonely. It feels like they were saying, "If you think you can let you do it on your own." (VP4H)

I know what is expected of me as a leader, and I was expecting someone who is either officially assigned or voluntarily will guide and familiarize me with the daily leadership routines in the university. However, from day one I was by myself. There is no induction program; there is no one willing to introduce me to the management team and my staff. It was a very difficult and testing time. (VP9B)

These indicate that the lack of a welcoming and supportive environment makes it difficult for some women leaders to become familiar with the system, and thus, settle down quickly into their new role. The mismatch between the expectation and the reality creates frustration, and this potentially affects their leadership engagement and contribution.

Role Model

The importance of role models in women's leadership advancement is widely accepted and it is becoming a common practice among HEIs (BlackChen, 2015; Brown, 2005; ESSA, 2021; Hill & Wheat, 2017). In Ethiopia, only a few women apply for senior-level leadership positions, and the lack of women role models was identified as one of the reasons for this. Regarding this, one research participant said, "it was very difficult for me to think about becoming a senior leader because I have not seen females in that position before" (VP3I). To address this gap, the gender strategy for the education and training sector proposed incentivizing women leaders to encourage them to "sustain and play as role models in these positions" (MoE, 2014, p. 29). However, this has not been practiced, and most of the participants did not have role models, as they were the first woman senior leaders in their respective universities. Studies also indicated that a limited number of women applying for senior leadership positions (Litzky & Greenhaus, 2007; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020) is associated with *inter alia*, a lack of women as role models in leadership (Moodly & Toni, 2015).

The research participants wanted to partly address this challenge, and they indicated that becoming a role model is one of their motives to apply for senior leadership positions and also one of their objectives to achieve during their leadership term. They even take this as a commitment, as one of the main reasons for them to stay in leadership roles despite several challenges they faced as women leaders.

One of my motives to apply for the current leadership position is to become a role model for other women. I am trying my best to achieve this. I am not saying that all women who are senior leaders are good role models. I will not be surprised if a man leader says that becoming a role model is not something that he intentionally does as a leader, because other men leaders could be good role models. However, in a system where there are few women senior leaders, I believe that becoming a role model for our women colleagues should be one of our objectives and something which we should intentionally do. (VP2A)

For different reasons, a leader may not finish her/his term. However, if you are among the first women to assume senior leadership, there are female academic staff who are closely watching you. If you are not successful or fail to finish your term for whatsoever reason, it sends a bad message to females who consider you as their role

model. So, in your leadership role, you need to take into consideration this additional role. (VP7E)

This also indicates that the termination of a senior woman leader will have a negative impact as it will leave women academics with no role model to look up to. This becomes serious when the woman who left her position is considered a role model even by other women holding similar senior leadership positions in other universities.

Leadership Capacity Development

Studies indicate that one reason for the lack of women's participation in leadership roles is the lack of or insufficient support for their professional effectiveness and career development (Moodly & Toni, 2017). In this sub-section, a lack of specific leadership capacities development elements such as mentoring, networking, and program development are presented and discussed.

Mentoring. Mentorship has a significant contribution to building women's professional development (Ely et al., 2011; ESSA, 2021; Hill & Wheat, 2017; Mate et al., 2018; Murphy et al., 2017). In a higher education context, where women are less represented in leadership roles, it is important to have people (both men and women) who can encourage and support women to be their best and become good leaders. Mentorship is one of the missing elements in women's leadership development in Ethiopian higher education, as well in higher education settings in other countries (Batool et al., 2013). Research participants also acknowledged this limitation:

I know mentorship is very important in teaching, research, and leadership. I also consider mentorship as a strategy that helps leaders to learn more about the institution and learn from experienced leaders. But mentoring is not a culture and practice in Ethiopian universities. (VP2A)

I am not sure if mentorship is part of any higher education policy at the national institutional levels. I strongly recommend the ministry and universities include mentorship in their policies and ensure effective women's mentorship implementation. It will be good if there were more women to mentor newly appointed women leaders and young women academic staff because there are many things that we will share from our experiences. (VP12J)

The study indicated a lack of mentorship policy and practice in Ethiopian higher education. It also implied the need to make a concerted effort among incumbent senior women leaders to mentor younger female academic staff in their leadership development.

Networking Opportunities. In large universities, academics, including women, rarely see and know each other, and do not have a formal group to share their experiences. In such contexts, women need to establish a professional network that helps them meet and know each other and groom them as leaders (BlackChen, 2015). The importance of women leaders/professional associations or networks is acknowledged as a good strategy to share experiences and build leadership capacity. The World Women University Presidents Forum, the European Women Rectors Association, the African Women in Higher Education Network, and the Forum for African Women Vice Chancellors are some of the notable continental and global level professional associations that promote women's leadership development in higher education. In Ethiopia, the importance of the women leaders' network has been recognized, and MoSHE established a women vice presidents' network. This network aims to serve as a national professional hub for sharing practical knowledge and experience, developing women's leadership capacity, and inspiring women to rise to senior leadership positions. However, it is still not well institutionalized nor engaged in any

professional activities. Research participants emphasized the importance of re-establishing and institutionalizing the network.

It will be good if the Ministry [of Education] institutionalizes the female leaders' network and use the network as a platform to empower women leaders and female academic staff in general. (VP9B)

As participants indicated, the lack of impactful professional women's networks has continued to be one of the barriers to women's leadership development in Ethiopia, similar to the situation in other developing countries (Batool et al., 2013; Yousaf & Schmiede, 2017).

Leadership Program. Access to leadership development programs is important for all who aspire to be leaders at different levels. Hence, there are several initiatives across the world to increase the number of women in the leadership pipeline and ensure they are better prepared for these roles. Studies also emphasized the need for women's leadership development programs more than ever before (Gandhi & Sen, 2021; Madsen et al., 2012). In Ethiopia, the gender strategy for the education and training sector identified the lack of leadership development and support for women as one of the factors that restrained them from taking on leadership positions (MoE, 2014). However, no serious measure has been taken to address this challenge, and as indicated in the science, higher education, and training sector's 10-year development plan (2020/21-2029/30), a shortage of requisite leadership capacity and experience continued as one of the major threats to the Ethiopian higher education sector (MoSHE, 2020c).

Research participants emphasized the importance of developing the knowledge and skills capacity of women across a range of leadership competencies. However, in Ethiopia, there is a lack of planned women's leadership development programs.

I did not receive or participate in any leadership capacity-building program before taking the position. I had two opportunities (exposure visit and training) in the final year of my term. I found them very helpful. It would have been great if I had those opportunities at the beginning of my term. I could have done things better. (VP5D)

We [women vice presidents] went to China for capacity development. ... This is after we became a leader. There is no planned empowerment or capacity-building leadership program. You will participate only when there are opportunities which I don't know how it comes. It would have been good if such training were given before we become a leader. So that we will confidently apply, compete and assume leadership positions. (VP2A)

There is leadership capacity-building training once in a while but it is not often well-planned and need-based. (VP4H)

The above excerpts indicate that although there were some leadership capacity development activities at national and institutional levels, most of them were not well planned and on an ad hoc basis. In Ethiopia, since 2010 there were three major higher education leadership capacity development initiatives. First, the University Leadership and Management Capacity Development is a project implemented in 2011-2015 by the Education Strategy Center in collaboration with the Maastricht School of Management. The project provided leadership training to 805 (133 female and 672 male) trainees (university board members, presidents, and department heads) from second-generation universities.

The second major initiative is the Higher Education Leadership and Management program. This project was implemented in 2016–2017 by the Ethiopian Ministry of Education in collaboration with the Centre for Higher Education (CHE; Germany), and the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPs; University of Twente). The leadership training was provided to 78 (6 female and 72 male) incumbent senior and mid-level leaders including presidents, vice presidents, and directors. The third leadership capacity development initiative is the Ethiopian Higher Education Leadership Program (EtHELP), implemented in 2018–2021 by the Ethiopian Institute for Higher Education in collaboration with MoSHE, CHEPS, and CHE. EtHELP initially focused on incumbent middle-level academic leaders, mainly deans. However, out of the total 238 mid-level leaders, only 22 of them were women, even though there were an increasing number of women mid-level leaders in public universities (96 in 2017/18; 123 in 2018/19; and 198 in 2019/20); MoSHE, 2021). These numbers not only show the absence of a good number of women in mid-level leadership positions but the lack of information about available opportunities. EtHELP provided women-only leadership training for 139 female academics. This has two main purposes. First, to develop women's leadership capacity through an approach that potentially attracts more female faculty. Second, it facilitates and enhances professional networking and relationship building, which is a key strategy in women's leadership development programs (Hopkins et al., 2008; Selzer et al., 2017). Women-only leadership training contributes to developing a stronger sense of self and stronger relationships with other women (Vinnicombe & Singh, 2002). Generally, compared to the small number of women and the significant challenges they face as leaders, the contribution of current ad hoc programs that focus on women's leadership development is very minimal. To address the limitation of leadership capacity opportunities in higher education, MoSHE designed a training curriculum for higher education executive leadership, management, and governance (MoSHE, 2020b). Although this leadership development program aims to build and sustain the leadership capacity of higher education leaders, thus far, it has never been implemented.

Informal Networks

As in any organization, informal networks based on interest, profession, friendship, etc., exist within the university community. Participants indicated that there is an informal network among men senior leaders. Women noted that while they have not been deliberately ignored or pushed out, cultural issues prevent them from being part of these informal networks.

There is a tendency for men to often spend their spare time with other men both in and outside the university and the same goes for women. Moreover, men tend to stay more in the office after working hours. Women do not often join them because they are unable to stay long due to family responsibilities (Yousaf & Schmiede, 2017). Some even thought that culturally, establishing informal networks was a men's activity, and society would not accept women doing that outside work hours. Research participants indicated that in such informal networks, men leaders discuss different work-related issues, and this makes it easy for men to reach a consensus during formal meetings. Concerning this, participants reflected on their experience as follows:

Men use their informal networks to discuss issues that require deliberation in a formal management meeting. This is not happening only once or twice; it happens very often. In the first instance, I was surprised that they are in a hurry to decide without discussing the issue in detail. In such a situation, they sometimes even forget my presence and won't ask me if I have any thoughts or reflections on the issue. (VP5D)

An informal network plays a significant impact in decision-making, but we are not part of that for many reasons including family and society. In many cases, I have

seen management-related decisions being made through a discussion held in an informal network. This facilitates their [men's] job, but it is difficult for us to be there just to approve what they already discussed. When they decide on important issues just like that, I felt like I am a subordinate to the male-dominated management team. There are dates when I deliberately missed management meetings because I was not happy to be there, but I cannot continue doing that all the time unless I leave my position. (VP1A)

Thus, informal networking, as a platform for men leaders to discuss and decide work-related issues, was identified as a major factor that frustrated women leaders and affected their leadership contribution. Such informal networking also potentially discourages female academics from taking leadership roles. Studies also indicated that informal networking is also a barrier to women's leadership in higher education in other countries like Kazakhstan and Mexico (Kuzhabekova, 2021; Maldonado-Maldonado & Gómez, 2021).

Sociocultural Barriers

Social and cultural beliefs, values, and attitudes toward women have an impact on women's leadership development. This study identified two sociocultural barriers, namely sociocultural attitudes and work-life balance.

Sociocultural Attitudes

Some members of Ethiopian society believe that leadership is not a female thing to do. There are also negative attitudes from social circles (Gandhi & Sen, 2021) including the idea that females cannot do what males do as a leader. This attitude is mainly based on the belief that good leadership requires innate talent, which males often have and exhibit. These ideas have much to do with the traditional culture in Ethiopia that expects females to be more active in and responsible for family caregiving and related issues. As a result, some members of the higher education community struggle to accept women as leaders, and this makes women's leadership aspirations and practices difficult. As much as there are colleagues who encourage women to apply for senior leadership and support them during their leadership terms, there are others who discourage women from taking up leadership positions and make their leadership roles difficult. As participants indicated below, some university community members are not in favor of women's participation in senior leadership roles.

There are university community members who are not happy to see women in senior leadership positions. These people find it difficult to accept instruction from a women leader. ... There are cases when some outside customers came to my office and tell me that they are looking for the vice president. They are saying this while I was the only one in the office. This says a lot about our society's perception of leaders. (VP1A)

The challenge that women leaders face is not only from academics and men but also from administrative staff including women. For example, my secretary and one of the directors, both females, were not happy to have me as their boss. I had a very difficult time working with these people in the first few months. (VP3I)

I want to apply for a vice-president position because I was encouraged and supported by colleagues, friends, and some senior leaders. ... On the deadline day, I submitted my application to the secretary of the president who is responsible for collecting applications. She thought that I am submitting someone's application because she won't expect a woman to compete for that leadership position. (VP10G)

These excerpts clearly show the impact of sociocultural expectations on women's leadership. They also assert that it is not only men but also women who tend to believe that leadership is a man's job. This belief is associated with the "think leader, think male" mindset, which creates invisible barriers to women's leadership (Catalyst, 2007). Participants also acknowledged that while some people believe in women's competency in leadership, but they also think that the system prioritizes men. Although sociocultural expectations remain one of the barriers to women's leadership in Ethiopia, participants noted that this situation has been changing through time, and it is not also the greatest barrier to leadership as indicated in the ESSA (2021) report.

In the Ethiopian higher education context, it is a common practice for senior leaders to continue working in the office after working hours. It is also common to have dinner with special guests from Ethiopia and abroad. Research participants know that these aspects of institutional culture have been practiced for a long time, and they think that it is important to participate in such activities, which are not considered daily routines. However, the sociocultural expectations of the wider community, in some cases, including spouses, prevents women leaders from taking part in what they believe is important for their institution and their own professional development and networking. Thus, as indicated below, some women prefer not to participate.

I know that my leadership position requires spending some time with guests in the early evening. I also believe this is important, but I cannot do this often because I don't want this to become a talking point for the community and disturb my marriage life. (VP4H)

As you know, in Ethiopia, it is very common for a male president and vice president to stay longer in office in the evening to discuss or respond to urgent issues. I cannot stay longer and work with a male president or vice president because it will have a different meaning in the community. Some husbands are not happy as well. (VP9B)

These excerpts imply that social barriers prevent women leaders from participating in issues that need their presence, and this could potentially be considered a weakness or disobedience. Social expectations also prevent them from having an opportunity to develop their social capital and professional networks.

Some participants also mentioned that the way females have been socialized as children has contributed to their reluctance to assume leadership roles. As children, women grew up exercising gender-specific roles that often labelled females more as caretakers and less as initiators and leaders. This aligns with gender role theory (Eagly, 1997), which associates women's lack of aspiration and failure to rise to leadership with their childhood gender role orientation.

Lack of Work-Life Balance

Gender-based division of labor and social responsibilities force female academics to put their families ahead of their careers, including leadership roles. In most African countries, family care responsibility is a major barrier to women's leadership (Adu-Yeboah et al., 2021; Li & Kam, 2021), and Ethiopia is no different. In Ethiopia, family caring, mainly caring for children, is almost the sole responsibility of women regardless of their religious, social, and academic backgrounds. Participants also indicated that women need more time than men for social life. Ethiopian society cherishes and is sensitive to communal life. Culturally, people are expected to be with their relatives, neighbors, and community groups, both during the ups and downs. Although expected of both men and women, it is more burdensome for women than men, as women cannot be excused for missing different social occasions in good (e.g., weddings and baptism ceremonies) and bad times (e.g., when someone is sick or dies) due to their responsibilities as senior leaders in a university. Women leaders

do not often complain about these social expectations and responsibilities but they acknowledge its pressure and negative impact on their leadership role, as many members of universities and society-at-large do not understand the competing dual responsibilities of women leaders. Participants also said the following regarding the work-life balance:

It is very difficult to maintain a balance between your work as a leader and your life as a mother and a wife. ...I was a mother and a wife before I took the leadership role and there are many things in my family for which I am primarily responsible. This is not because I want but that is how it is in our society. So, I cannot say I need to be relieved from my family responsibility because of my leadership role at the university. What I was thinking is to create a work-life balance. I would say I am not successful in this because both my university nor society is not supportive. (VP3I)

Equality does not mean ignoring facts and social issues. Universities seem to forget that we are a mother, we have more responsibility at home, etc. Having a family is a big part of my life. I prioritize being with my family over spending time with colleagues and working on weekends which is common among men leaders. I know this decision has an impact on my leadership contribution and development, but my life principle is family first. ...It would have been great if universities understand this and come up with strategies that will help us to create a relatively good work-life balance. Rules and pressures that disregard this social reality will only serve against our commitment and leadership development. (VP8B)

Research participants also indicated that it is not easy to be a university leader and manage a family. Therefore, some women academics prioritize managing and raising a family over developing their careers and becoming leaders. Such lack of work-life balance, coupled with the patriarchal nature of Ethiopian society and its HEIs, become major barriers to the inclusion and development of women in leadership.

Personal Barriers

Studies identified several issues related to personal factors that pull women away from taking leadership roles (BackChen, 2015; Dang, 2017). In this study, fear of failure and low self-esteem, which is affected by imposter syndrome, are identified as personal barriers to the advancement of women to leadership roles and their success within those roles.

Low Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence and Fear of Failure

Research participants indicated that women academic's self-confidence regarding leadership roles dwindled over time as a result of a lack of mentorship, negative stereotyping, and male-dominated institutional practices. The unsuccessful stories that women academics hear about senior women leaders whom they considered as good role models also leads them to think and believe that they will not be successful leaders. Research participants also indicated that some female academics lack belief in their leadership skills and capacities and often wait for affirmation from colleagues. This lack of self-confidence makes women academics reluctant to apply for senior leadership positions (Gandhi & Sen, 2021) and affects women leaders' ability to influence others and perform to their level best (BackChen, 2015).

Women academics often assume that there are many better-qualified candidates for senior leadership positions and think that even if they apply, it is very likely that their fate is to fail. Some study participants also indicated that even if they were to be successful in their application, they felt that it would be very difficult to be successful in an environment that is not women-friendly.

Therefore, fear of failure is one of the drawbacks of women's leadership in Ethiopian higher education.

I know that failure is not something unique to women. ...I am not sure if it is a cultural thing but from experience, I can say that we are generally more afraid of failure than men. Some colleagues are better qualified than me and have whatever it takes to be successful leaders, but they are victims of the fear of failure because whenever they think about leadership, they think about failure and its consequence.

Conclusion and Implications

Despite some improvement in women's leadership development in Ethiopian higher education, the results of this study show many glass ceilings remain unbroken. The shared excerpts also reveal that while each of major barriers have a negative impact, institutional barriers are considered the greatest barrier as they also exacerbate sociocultural and personal barriers to women's leadership development. Women in higher education across the world face common challenges. And yet, some of the barriers, such as race, class, caste, and colonialism—which are identified as major barriers in some other countries, were not mentioned as barriers to women's leadership in Ethiopia. Although ethnicity can be a significant barrier within HEIs in Ethiopia, it is not identified as a barrier to women's leadership in the country. There are, however, significant similarities between barriers to women's leadership in higher education and those in the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the government of Ethiopia, as indicated in the United Nations Women study (Kassahun & Zeleke, 2021).

Based on current practices, one could argue that the main reason the Ethiopian government involves women in senior leadership positions is based more on tokenism than what women contribute as leaders. Yet MoE and HEIs should believe in women's leadership qualities and their contributions and show genuine interest in women's leadership development. The barriers to women's leadership development in Ethiopia are multifaceted, and addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach and concerted efforts from major stakeholders. Accordingly, first, the government needs to develop context-specific gender and inclusion programs as a means of achieving greater gender equity in the workplace place in general and in leadership in particular.

Second, the MoE should put in place evidence-based policies and strategies to address the challenges that women face regarding leadership roles. The ministry and HEIs also should develop a system that supports and monitors the effective implementation of policies and strategies and make leaders accountable for the lack of or ineffective implementation. This study implies that policies and directives are important, but not sufficient to address the barriers to the further development of women's leadership in higher education. Implementations of initiatives and activities aimed at reducing the individual, institutional, and societal challenges that inhibit women's participation in senior leadership positions need to be context specific. Hence, the MoE should advance women's leadership through tailored mentoring, promoting and facilitating professional networking and capacity development opportunities, and implementing context-specific leadership selection and appointment processes. HEIs also should encourage and support formal mentoring and leadership capacity development opportunities for women.

Third, although the number of highly qualified women academics in Ethiopia is slowly increasing, it is still very small compared to their male counterparts. This divide demands HEIs to support female academics as they seek to improve their qualifications, their confidence level, their professionalism (BlackChen, 2015), and their intellectual ability, which are all related to leadership development (Northouse, 2009). In this regard, female academics need to be devoted to building

their self-confidence and playing significant roles in developing their careers in higher education and leadership. The government should also put into practice the saying that “educating a woman is educating a country” rather than often using it for political expediency.

Fourth, there is a need for strengthening women's leadership networks and specifically establishing networks for female academics at national and institutional levels, respectively. The purposes for such networks would include, among others, creating platforms for mutual support and experience sharing, developing different initiatives for leadership capacity development, and ensuring gender equality and equity in general. Unless there is such a systemic response to address the identified and other possible barriers, women in higher education will continue to struggle in their pursuit of senior leadership positions.

The study did not include men leaders, thus limiting the potential to get a different perspective on women's leadership in Ethiopia. Moreover, this study is limited to senior leadership, although the underrepresentation of women is evident at all levels of leadership. Thus, future research on this topic might also include feedback from men leaders and focus on other levels of leadership. The findings also draw attention to another important direction for future research: to examine female faculty qualifications and/or interest in pursuing leadership positions to better understand the pipeline of qualified candidates, and also to examine whether these barriers are influential in women's leadership outside the higher education context.

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About the Author

Abebaw Yirga Adamu

Addis Ababa University

abebaw.yirga@aaau.edu.et

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4673-6596>

Abebaw Yirga Adamu is an associate professor of higher education in the Department of Educational Planning and Management at Addis Ababa University. His research interest includes higher education (policy, diversity, quality, internationalization, harmonization, and leadership). Dr. Adamu is the former director of the Ethiopian Institute for Higher Education.

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