

WOMEN IN SPORT IN KENYA: LEADERSHIP STYLES AND PRACTICE

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## Abstract

*This qualitative study examined the roles of women in sport and how they practice leadership. Participants were purposively selected from various sport organizations in Kenya. Interviews were used to collect data. Findings show women to adopt transformational leadership styles and practice.*

*Keywords:* **Women, Sports, Leadership, Kenya**

## Introduction

Leadership is particularly complicated for women because it requires them to align their actions with values, weigh the options they hold, manage multiple work relationships, and navigate complicated boundaries, while at the same time trying to meet obligations related to their professional duties and responsibilities (Hertneky, 2010). The multiplicity of these roles may prove quite burdensome to some women, leading to a lack of interest in leadership positions. Historical, social, organizational, and political factors including patriarchy a system that promotes possession of power and economic privilege (Eisenstein, 1999; Omwami, 2011) have resulted in marginalization of, and excluding women from participating in the social, economic and political agenda, thus underrepresentation of women in leadership ( Norman, 2010).

In the republic of Kenya, Affirmative Action Bill of 2007 requiring women to hold at least 30 percent of the political posts and the public sector jobs is yet to be achieved (Ogutu, 2010), as indicated in sports organizations including the National Olympic committee (20%), Athletics Kenya (12%), Kenya Secondary Schools Sports Association (17%), Kenya Hockey Union (19%), Kenya Volleyball Federations (7%), and Kenya Rugby Union (20%). The gendered stereotypes emanating from traditional beliefs about lack of leadership characteristics

in women promoting gender differences with those of men superior to those of women (Branson, 2007; Webb & Macdonald, 2007) and results in normalization of the gendered stereotypes thus maintaining the status quo (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007).

Leadership style refers to the behaviour, actions and decisions of leaders, and to ways of implementing (Sadler, 1997). According to McAllister (2006), women's ways of leading are different from those of men as men favour the agentic style of leadership that is aggressive, competitive and direct. The feminine style of leadership is relationship oriented, participatory, empowering, and concerns shared leadership (Doherty & Manfredi, 2010). It is also interpersonal, charismatic, collaborative (Mullen, 2009), dynamic, (Oplatka, 2001), and consultative (Julien et al., 2008). Moreover, women have been found to be more democratic in their style and are more transformational than men who are more transactional (Doherty & Manfredi, 2010). Generally, organizations seek or try to develop styles that are deemed as most effective in fulfilling organizations' mission. According to Bass and Fiedler's 1978 situational theory, leadership styles is contextual. While leaders may profess a certain style, the organizational subtexts or cultures determine the leadership style. For women leaders, these subtexts may present a challenge; but for others, adopting the preferred style has become the only option.

### **Theoretical Framework**

A theoretical perspective that informs this study on women in sports leadership is fashioned alongside Segura's (2007) feminist analysis of the hegemonic power of patriarchy. The theory of feminism is used in this study to explore gender relations and the status of women in sports. Feminist's research challenges power relationships that exist in most of the social sectors including sports, and also critiques sports as a sexist and male dominated institute (Sartore &

Cunningham, 2007). Through social constructivism, multiplicity of perspectives in research is accepted (Creswell, 2007). ). Feminists identify oppression and exploitation of women as the main features in patriarchy, with the former centering on sex and class differences, and the later occurring in labor relations between men and women.

## **Methods**

### *Purpose of the study & research questions*

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore leadership styles and practice of women in sport leadership in Kenya. This study is significant as it highlights the important roles of women in leadership. It also provides policy implications that can enhance the place and role of women in sport leadership. Research questions that guided this study were: 1.) What are the roles and responsibilities of women in sport leadership? 2.) What are the leadership styles of women sports leaders?

### *Sampling and data collection*

Ten Participants were purposively selected (Rosenberge & Daly, 1993) from various sports organizations in Kenya. Purposive sampling ensure that you get information-rich cases that will manifest the phenomena of interest (Patton, 2002). Participants included school teachers, ministry officials, and businesswomen or private entrepreneurs. Open ended interviews allowed participants to extensively express their points of view (Giorgi, 1997) . Each participant was asked to describe an incident and further prompts were used to get detailed information. One-time 60 to 90-minutes interviews were conducted. Member checking and the use of thick-rich descriptions, thus ensuring trustworthiness of data (Bryman, 2001). All interview transcripts

were labelled to include the use of pseudonym as a way of ensuring confidentiality (Patton, 2002).

### *Data analysis*

Thematic analysis (Roulston, 2001) of the data was used. The purpose of thematic analysis is to generate categories and identify common thematic elements across the research participants, the events they report and the actions they take (Reissman, 2008). Following Saldana (2009), the researcher applied Strauss and Corbin's initial coding, which involved breaking data into discrete parts and comparing them for similarities and difference from repeated words. These codes were put in categories to help create some order and then developed into themes (Saldana, 2009). Constant reflection on the research questions and interview questions guided the researcher to see the emerging patterns and themes.

## **Results and Discussions**

Participant's age ranged from 40-60 years old. They had a career job and volunteered as sports leaders. They were all mothers and had been leaders in sport for more than two years. They had participated in competitive athletics at various levels. Similar to previous studies (Branson, 2007; Henry et al., 2004; Inglis et al., 2000), participants in this study were highly educated. Effective leadership requires one to constantly upgrade their knowledge and ways of doing things so that they can remain relevant within the organization, hence training and preparation for leadership roles are considered critical for one to become an effective leader (Lafreniere & Longman, 2008). In line with this perspective, several participants stated that they were pursuing further education and that they also attended numerous training courses.

### *Roles and responsibilities*

The organizational settings and structures determine assignment of roles and responsibilities, and could have a profound effect on a person's ability to make or influence decisions in the organization. For example J a high school teacher described herself as an administrator, a communicator, and a teacher, with each of these positions having defined roles and responsibilities such as mentoring, counseling, and communication. Sanyo, a university sports administrator described herself as a teacher, as a coach, and as a sports administrator. Each of these participants clearly defined her leadership roles and the accompanying responsibilities. The narratives of these women leaders showed multiple roles that they performed beyond expectations. These findings resonate with previous research showing women to engage in multiple roles (Evetts, 1988; Park, 2010).

**Developing new programs for the sport organizations.** Some of the assigned responsibilities for the women leaders included developing programs.

**Table 1**

	<b>Highlights of Programs developed by women</b>	<b>Quotations</b>
LA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Girls only tournament</li> <li>• Cooperate sponsorship</li> <li>• Women's league</li> </ul>	<i>...So I started the league and I also started a schools tournament, I got Ksh. 25,000 in sponsorship ...the last amount I was given was half a million</i>
BL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women sport</li> <li>• Cooperate sponsorship</li> <li>• Competed internationally</li> </ul>	<i>... We registered as a women's organization. Because of that the constitution had to change... they were scared of women because we were getting sponsors.</i>
SA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sports&amp; Drugs program</li> <li>• Successful in the African region</li> </ul>	<i>When I had to set up single handed, you know, and run the organization under the commonwealth, I was handling ten member countries of Africa</i>
PR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Junior tournaments</li> <li>• Cooperate sponsorships</li> <li>• Targeted poor communities</li> </ul>	<i>... and asked me if I would be interested in developing a junior sport program, and for me, working with young people was my passion....I got there... from those two tournaments, we were sponsored fully</i>
LA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workplace sport</li> </ul>	<i>.... So I managed to get a team and I managed to sensitize the management to set up sports activities for the employees</i>
MR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work place sport</li> </ul>	<i>When I introduced sports in the company each department top competition, it was nice and successful.</i>

For example, LA, BL and PR were mandated to develop sport programs for women and youth. These leaders developed a successful programs through securing corporate sponsorship. (Table 1). Results attest to women's commitment, success, and ability to manage programs. Politicization of the programs resulted in men taking over and locking women out thus enhancing male domination and maintenance of status-quo (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). Women often drop out of leadership when they are unable to influence decisions (Pfister, & Radtke, 2006) as was the case in this study. Surprisingly, all of the women leaders continued to engage in sports at different levels. Some participants' initiated successful workplace employee sports programs to an important way of workers to socialize with each other, and as a way of increasing employee productivity.

**Fulfilling athletes' physical and psychological needs.** In their leadership roles, women were not just interested in the athletes producing results; rather they took into consideration the athletes' physical and psychological wellbeing. LA provided meals and sometimes accommodation for her teams because a number of them were from poor families "*I bought mattresses ... and I would cook meals from my house, I supplied the meals, my house help would cook*" EV empathized with the athlete's poor socio-economic situation and would host some at her own cost. Eva stated "*I am living with six boys from this school, who are poor and they are footballers.... Sometimes the school has no money...*" These narratives by EV, and LA, depicts the women's nurturing side and testify to the important roles and responsibilities that women leaders used to fulfill.

**Decision-making process.** Those with long established careers, and high-level positions in sports organizations had more influence in decisions. Some participants pointed to the low participation in decision making as meetings were never called and decisions were made

elsewhere and only passed on to the committee to implement ( Table 2). SP’s participation in decision making process was limited, and that she only implemented decisions by the sports committee. Similar to previous studies, (Sperandio & Kagoda, 2010) four participants indicated that their involvement in the decision-making process was determined by one’s position in the organization, years of experience, and organizational contexts. Moreover, a woman’s ability to be involved in the decision-making process was only sustained when she was in good terms with other members of the board as indicated by LN.

**Table 2**

	<b>Involvement in decision making process</b>	
LN	YES. locked out for opposing a decision	<i>Yes, I was the decision maker throughout but what so when they wanted to amalgamate and I refused, I was locked out and could no longer contribute to the decision making process.</i>
MB	YES. Knowledge important	<i>Where I am and where I have made decisions that have been passed, most of them have been accepted so far. Because first of all you have to prove yourself as an authority in the area and more</i>
MR	YES. Position is important	<i>Okay, being in the Board as a Board member, you are involved in all decision making regardless, and you are entitled to your opinion</i>
RR	Limited. Locked out of executive committee	<i>The sub-committee has got to be invited because this is your field as the sub-committee but then we are never given the opportunity. The Executive sits locks out completely as a sub-committee.</i>
SP	Limited role	<i>when it came to the decision, the board makes a decision making. the Chairman, there is the Secretary...they are the ones who make decisions ...mine is to help implement whatever they have decided</i>
OL	YES. respect for winning	<i>They try to... always consult me when making the program. I would play a big role in the decision making process</i>

**Leadership styles.** Results pointed towards various preferred leadership styles, which included collaborative, situational and democratic leadership styles as indicated by the table below (Table3): While most organizations previously preferred the agentic / male leadership styles, in this study, women leaders used diversified but similar leadership styles that made them successful. These results are consistent with previous research showing women leaders to use interpersonal, empowering, collaborative, democratic and participative styles of leadership (Doherty & Manfredi, 2010). Participants in the study stated that their styles were determined by

the situation, thus sustaining Bass and Fielder's 1978 (Bass, 1997) situational theory, where the style is determined by the context. It was quite surprising that despite sport being a male dominated area, none of the participants indicated adopting the masculine style of leadership. Each participant seemed to adopt a specific style that was suitable to the type of work and specific organization. Also, regardless of the leadership style, it was difficult to dissociate women from their nurturing side which emerged from the way they handled their charges, taking into consideration the athlete's physical, psychological and social welfare.

**Table 3**

	<b>Leadership style</b>	<b>Narrative quotations</b>
WA	Participatory, collaboration	<i>I love people participating.... I give chance to other people. I lead by example because first of all I have to show them. I am a hands-on person when it comes to leadership</i>
MB	Networking, Collaboration	<i>My leadership style is... I believe in networking, collaborating, listening to somebody, not being judgmental and not taking you from what people take you.</i>
EV	Democratic , consultation	<i>..Innovative, democratic, you don't just make a decision before you consult... before I consult with the Principal</i>
SP	Situational Authoritarian & Democratic	<i>We have mixed qualities being ... In a disciplined force like this one makes you go autocratic. Yes, but since now you see sports is voluntary, you have to be democratic. You have to accommodate views</i>
OL	Democratic	<i>Of course I am very democratic. I give them [student athletes] freedom. And then democracy can...</i>
SA	Participatory, Consultation	<i>When we sit and I give them our vision, our mission, then I want to hear what...then I get their opinion, get their opinion...</i>
LA	Participatory, collaborative	<i>I like to involve others</i>

Generally, women in this study aligned themselves with transformational style of leadership which focused on empowering, relationship building, inspiring and motivating workers, communicating and power sharing (Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2003). In conclusion, this study showed women to have successfully combined education and sports a fact that made them role models to aspiring athletes. Findings of this study cannot be applied to any other context. A more comprehensive research on the leadership styles of men in sport is recommended.

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