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Changing the Narrative through Visionary Leadership: The Niger Delta Woman Experience in Nigeria

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Abstract:

The accelerated growth of women's participation in leadership positions is an action to stimulate inclusive leadership as a means of discouraging gender inequality. Women's involvement and participation in policy making have attracted serious debate on whether or not women have the competency and capacity to perform and deliver as their male counterparts. Investigating through the lens of the leadership literature indicated that women in leadership is an emerging approach to bridging the gap between men and women and also to encourage women's involvement, engagement and inclusion in management of both public and private organisations. This significantly pointed to the fact that women who constitute a larger part of the population have not been effectively engaged and represented in positions of authority to contribute meaningfully to the growth and development of the economy. This further demonstrates that women who are made up of human capital (knowledge, skills, experiences, and abilities) are wasting the majority of their time because they have not been effectively and efficiently utilized to improve the well-being of our society. Women's discrimination and violence against women have created negative feelings and emotions among the feminine class against their male counterparts. Sexual harassment and gender inequality have also discouraged women from participating in social, political, economic and religious activism. The impact of this is waste of man-hour, violation of human rights, lack of trust, productivity degeneracy and sub-optimal performance. Therefore, there is a need to break the class ceiling created by men for men. A culture that is created by men for their interests should be discouraged to promote gender parity in our society. Women should be engaged and encouraged to participate to foster inclusive and visionary leadership and a gender-friendly work environment.

Keywords: Visionary leadership, gender parity, Niger Delta region, inclusive leadership, globalisation

1. Introduction

Leadership is a far-reaching concept discussed in every facet of life (Taylor, Cornelius & Colvin, 2013). It is a means of transforming and building a people-oriented society (Wallace (2008). Today's society is a total departure from a simple and stable economy to a superlatively dynamic, complex and challenging one. This dramatic change is as a result of globalization, competition and the rising level of education as well as the awareness of people in our society (Valenzuela, 2007). In recent times, individuals and groups have made frantic efforts to build and develop an egalitarian society where gender differences are down played as a means of reducing gender discrimination and inequality (Woodard, 2007). This is because people now know that the largest population, specifically women, suffer from the issues of discrimination, stereotypes, prejudice, harassment and domestic violence, therefore making them less productive in our society (Wirth, 2009; Yukongdi & Benson, 2005).

It is noted that most women are more creative, knowledgeable, skilled and talented than their male counterparts, yet they are mostly relegated to the background (Ahsan, Abdullah, Gun, & Alam, 2009; Yukongdi, 2005). These problems and challenges have stimulated well-meaning individuals and associations to champion a strong advocacy and movement towards women's freedom and emancipation. This movement is difficult and threatened in our situation where the Niger Delta woman does not have a voice. Gender parity is significantly discouraged in an atmosphere of bad leadership and this has been the story of the Niger Delta woman in the past.

Therefore, this paper suggests a visionary leadership style as a means of addressing the above highlighted challenges. It examines the need to change gender inequality through visionary leadership. Specific objectives of this discourse include: Vision and visionary leadership, the Niger Delta woman's experience, visionary leadership and gender parity, suggestions and policy implications, conclusion.

2. Visionary Leadership Concept

A vision is a mental picture of what the future could be through strategic planning and implementation of a road map (Nwachukwu, Zufan, Chladkova & Fadeyi, 2017). It is often shaped by the foresight of a leader whose capacity to deal with the present is governed by a broad understanding of the issues of the time. Such a leader is modelled after Plato, the Greek philosopher who stated that man is known for selflessness, wisdom, and political sagacity (Kirkpatrick (2004;

Fallahi, Mehrad&Rahpaymaelizehee, 2015).A good leader is self-sacrificial not in the mosaic sense, but in the tradition of foregoing the mundane pleasure of life and pursuing ideas(Dhammika, 2016; Ann, 2015).

A great leader is a model that functions in the tradition of the good shepherd or the servant leader whose thoughts and actions are predicated on the common good of followers (Alimo-Metcalfe (2010). The role of leadership in meeting the demands of various stakeholders cannot be underestimated. Leadership is a process in which an individual (leader) influences other (followers) to achieve a common goal through a well-articulated vision(Elmuti, Jia,& Davis, 2009; Chin, Lott, Rice & Sanchez-Hucles, 2007; Hall, Garrette-Akinsanya&Huncles, 2007). Helgesen (1990)noted that leadership is strategic to achieving corporate goals and objectives while a corporate vision forms the basis for setting and achieving firm objectives. Therefore, there is the need for firms to drive their vision in order to achieve and sustain competitive advantage. Leaders who achieve this strategic vision and mission to accomplish goals are known as visionary leaders (Dhammika, 2016).

Kirkpatrick (2004) opined that visionary leadership is a people-oriented approach to achieving goals for common interest with a clear or crystallized vision devoid of discrimination irrespective of gender and social status. In recent times, several studies have shown that visionary leadership stands apart from traditional leadership behaviour in the fact that it creates an inspiring vision and communicates such vision effectively among subordinates to stimulate joint effort for goal attainment. Visionary leadership, simply put, is the ability or capability to create and communicate a clear vision for others to follow in order to achieve a common goal (Dhammika, 2016; Valenzuela, 2007).

Kirkpatrick (2004) pointed out that visionary leaders can be found in religious organizations, business, government, community groups, social change movements or sports teams; Taylor et al (2013) opine that leaders inspire others to focus on groups or organizational interests rather than on their self-interest. At this time of our development as the Niger Delta states, the need for visionary leadership cannot be underestimated if we must turn our ethnic diversity and our plurality into an advantage.

Visionary Leadership also boosts confidence among followers and inspires them to work beyond what they could have done without that inspiration (Akpinaar-Sposito, 2013). Visionary Leadership goes along with followers easily and finds it easy to influence them towards goal achievement. (Chin, Lott, Rice & Sanchez-Hucles, 2007). Visionary leadership recognizes the social climate in which it lives and works, takes risks, and succeeds in transforming the vision into reality. Visionary Leadership provides bridges from the present to the future(Nwachukwu, Zufan, Chladkova, and Fadeyi, 2017).

It is important for leaders to be able to translate the vision they conceptualize into reality without wavering. It is argued that there is no powerful engine driving an organization towards excellence and long-range success than an attractive, worthwhile vision of the future widely shared (Pounder & Coleman (2002). Some characteristics of visionary leadership are: imaginative, experienced, inspiring, passion for goal achievement, hardworking, reward-oriented, optimistic, motivated, loving and people oriented, persistence, knowledgeable and effective communicator (Schanbroech, Lam, & Cha, 2007; McKinsey & Company, 2007; Kirkpatrick (2004).The explanation and criticism of visionary leadership reveal that a visionary leader is someone who promotes and sustains an environment of gender equality and equal opportunities for all individuals (Macare, Hintea, & Mora, (2008).This is another point that needs careful attention for building and promoting an egalitarian society, especially developing a strong nation.

Examples of a few visionary leaders that have made significant differences in separate spheres of career: Alan Mullaly, the Chief Executive Officer of Ford Motors who transformed and turned around Ford Motors' fortunes with an exemplary visionary leadership style, Rudi Giuliani, who identified and seized opportunities to transform the New York World Trade Centre destroyed by terrorists on September 11, 2001, Nelson Mandela, former President of South Africa who fought and liberated the black race

3. The Niger Delta Woman Experience

The Niger Delta region in Nigeria comprises six (6) states which are; Rivers State, Delta State, Bayelsa State, Akwalbom State, Cross River State and Edo State. This region by political delineation is known as the South-South political Zone. The Niger Delta region is richly blessed with crude oil and most multinational oil companies operate in the area. It also has rich cultural heritage and human resources. Women are more populated than men, but leadership is designed by men for men. This is largely supported by the tradition and culture of the people. This cultural favouritism has created a gap of ineffective leadership. However, women in leadership note that effective leadership is the capacity to translate vision to meet the needs of followers(Lina &Fidan, 2015; Li, & Leung, 2001; Schein,2007).

Schein(1985) noted that leadership itself refers to the capacity or ability to convert vision to reality. The reality in this context means a goal that is achieved for a common interest. Several leadership studies have found that gender-sensitive leaders are more effective than gender-bias leaders in achieving common and all-embracing goals (Wallace, 2008; Woodard, 2007). The Niger delta woman's experience of leadership is not far from the typical African system where men are supported by the culture and tradition of the land to lead and women, on the other hand, are generally treated as subjects or followers with minimum or no contribution to how decisions should be made in our society. African culture empowers men more than their female counterparts. Decades ago, this was the practice against women in Nigeria. A common experience among women of old was gender discrimination and intimidation by their male counterparts (Wirth (2009). It was common knowledge and practice in Africa where women were not permitted or allowed to have a western education. Women's education was considered to be a waste and unproductive. The belief at that time was that the woman's role and responsibility was child-bearing and homecare Yukongdi, 2005). The Niger Delta woman was relegated to the kitchen and the management of the home chores. This discriminatory style of leadership gave men an advantage over women. This is a clear indication that men in the past and even now, enjoyed full control over women in our society.

An important fact is that the Niger Delta woman has a better story to share in terms of stereotypes and prejudice. The girl child's experience was that women cannot advance in their careers. It was a general belief or thought that a woman's career ends up in the home as a tool for baby-making, caring for her husband and the family. The girl's child was not given the opportunity to be financially independent. It was a common belief that when a woman is rich and financially independent, she could be a threat to men. As a result, she might have difficulties marrying.

It is a truism that certain types of beliefs about the personality or psychology of women were wrongly defined and did not reflect reality (Welch & Welch, 2006). Decades ago, people also believed that women could not handle leadership positions. This was a clear prejudice against women. The average woman in this region was subjected under the leadership of men and this was supported by a culture created by men for men. It was also argued that men are more stable psychologically and mentally than women, therefore women were placed under the control of men. Domestic violence and sexual harassment were common experiences for Niger Delta women in the past.

Several cases were reported in relation to violence against women. Women are more vulnerable to sexual harassment and molestation compared to their male counterparts. The challenges experienced by women in our society are enormous. The culture, tradition, and customs of the people did not strongly support the advocacy or movement to end women's discrimination, prejudice, domestic violence, and sexual harassment. Specific Challenges of the Girl Child in the region are: Early and forced marriage, culture of silence, child making and family care, female genital mutilation, little or no access to formal education, domestic violence, sexual harassment, widow discrimination and unequal political and economic empowerment.

The advocacy for gender parity today is supported by western education and laws, therefore promoting the liberation and freedom of children and women in building contemporary society. Women have faced prejudice in various sectors of the economy, despite their educational background and notable accomplishments around the world. The construction of the glass ceiling, for example, is more of a social than an individual barrier (Woodard, 2007; Wallace, 2008; Welch and Welch, 2006; Strout, 2001).

The public sector in Nigeria discriminates against women rather than the private sector. Politicians often exclude women, and women play a minor role in decision-making. Women make up less than 20% of elected officeholders and less than 30% of government appointments. Women seem to be more active in the civil service or public service than in state appointments; the majority of women are executives, permanent secretaries, deputy directors, and chief accountants, with opportunities for promotion, education, and development.

Most political appointments are made based on nepotism, tribalism, and connections or recommendations rather than qualifications and professionalism. In the private sector, this type of job is uncommon. Since the private sector is known for its effectiveness and performance, it is concerned with human capital growth. The private sector is devoid of mediocrity and no one can sacrifice their livelihood for nothing. In the private sector, gender diversity is more pronounced than in the public sector. Female leadership is seen as a strategic advantage for the future of the private sector.

However, work-life balance is an apparent obstacle for women in both the public and private sectors. Working women have long struggled to strike a balance between work and family life (Valenzuela, 2007). Another significant issue that women face is sexual harassment. Most women are used as personal or confidential secretaries by most men, and in certain situations, they are forced or pressured to have sex with their employer to avoid such challenges (Taylor, Cornelius & Colvin, 2013).

4. Visionary Leadership and Gender Parity Nexus

A visionary leader as stated earlier is a rare gem, an icon and a genius who has the capacity to lift a nation from the ordinary or the status-quo to an enviable height and accomplishment of societal goals and objectives (Valenzuela, 2007). The traditional leaders who were known to be hard and dictatorial are bound to fail in this contemporary climate characterized by workforce diversity, competition, globalization and increased digital appreciation as well as the proliferation of social networks. Gender parity in this context means building and developing an atmosphere of equal social, economic, religion, cultural, educational and career opportunities for both men and women in our society (Wirth, 2009).

Gender parity is significantly discouraged in an atmosphere of bad leadership and this has been the story of the Ijaw woman in the time past. The total neglect and discrimination of women in politics is a clear sign of a visionary leadership deficit. There seems to be a nexus between visionary leadership and gender parity (Woodard, 2007; Wallace, 2008; Schein, (2007). Different leadership studies have revealed that female leaders are more people oriented than their male counterparts (Pounder & Coleman, 2002; McKinsey & Company, 2007; Macare, Hintea & Mora, 2008).

Lina, and Fidan (2015) suggested that perceived incongruity between women's role and leadership roles lead to prejudicial appraisals of women leaders. It is clear that there is a bias against women's leadership, which is consistent with the specific characteristics of female leaders such as inspiring followers, intellectual stimulation, initiative and entrepreneurial drive, effective communication, and charismatic prowess (Babcock & Laschever (2009; Eagly & Karan, 2002). Chin, Lott, Rice and Sanchez-Hucles (2007) noted that African-American women throughout history have been able to be effective leaders despite living under an oppressive voice. This is a fact because women leaders in Nigeria too, in recent times, have also made significant contributions that are outstanding and enviable.

The Niger Delta girl child today is different from years ago. The female child today can compete favourably in all facets of life with their male counterparts. For example, it is very common in the Niger Delta for a girl child to choose a career as a Professor, Chartered Accountant and Bankers, Engineers, Pilots, and so on. It is also noteworthy that through visionary leadership, women now enjoy 30 percent participation in politics in both elective offices and appointments. This is a clear indication that there is a nexus between visionary leadership, women's effective participation and productivity.

5. Policy Implications and Solution

Studies indicate that visionary leadership has a significant effect on organizational effectiveness (Yulk, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2004). Leadership generally is an inherently subjective notion; therefore, this notion could be either implicit or explicit in the lens of women's leadership literature (Pounder & Coleman, 2002). However, several authors have noted that women are making a tremendous impact on national economies through their participation in organizations and their ownership of small and medium scale enterprises (Pounder et al., 2002). This paper is not interested in determining whether women are better leaders than men or men are better. Any attempt to do that could create a missing link in the body of leadership knowledge. The basic concern here is that flexibility in leadership is required to accommodate women's participation and downplay neglect of the strength of a woman, which is counterproductive as it has a direct impact on economic development and productivity.

Therefore, both public and private institutions should create gender friendly laws and flexible work time to accommodate women's participation. Women should be given the opportunity to drive and contribute to the national economy and nation-building. The issue of sexual harassment and violence against women should be prohibited; it is barbaric, uncivilized and inhuman. The dehumanization of women in all facets of life should be discouraged because it is immoral, unethical and against global best practices. It is therefore imperative that men and women of all facets of life should join hands to free women from all forms of discrimination, prejudicial actions, sexual harassment and female dehumanization in Nigeria.

6. The Vision for the Niger Delta Woman Today

Today, the Niger Delta woman has developed an exponential interest in education, scholarship and knowledge vending. This is obvious because the majority of Niger Delta women now work as lecturers in Nigerian universities, polytechnics, and colleges. People generally celebrate women nowadays because the girl child now enjoys privileges, she had not dreamt of decades ago.

Again, women are aware of not only their rights, but also of the opportunities that are available to them, thus changing the narrative of women and girls. Women have become the pride of our families, communities, state and country. Though we have not reached our desired destination, we have come a long way from where we used to be. A strategic question now is; where are we now? What is our story now? To answer these questions, we must take the lead from different testimonies made by reputable women who have distinguished themselves. These testimonies are endless. Today, the World Trade Organisation is being managed and controlled by a Nigerian woman. The WTO Director-General, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala is the seventh Director-General of the WTO. She is the first woman and the first African to serve in this capacity. She was officially made the Director-General of the WTO on 1 March, 2021. In May 2017, Miss Ikurumor Mabel Ogiriki, one of the Lincoln University scholarship recipients, graduated with a first-class honour alongside Valedictorian Perewari Victor, who is also a recipient of the same scholarship. We have many girls in schools and many more are returning to the classroom regardless of whatever setbacks they have faced in the past. Only recently, Miss Daisy Bruce of the Niger Delta University came out as the best graduating student in the University from the Dept. of Medicine/Surgery. Again, Ebizi Blessing Eradiri became a first female first-class graduate of law from the Niger Delta University and also made the same fit in the Nigeria Law School in 2020 and she was crowned as the Face of the Bayelsa Girl Child.

In terms of leadership positions, Senator Henry Seriake Dickson appointed over 35% of women to positions of authority during his tenure as Governor of Bayelsa State. Both elective and appointment had exceeded the 35% affirmative action for women in the state. In fact, the Administration has afforded women ample political space to prove their mettle in the running of government at local government, state and federal levels. Women now hold approximately 300 seats in appointive positions, which is the highest number in the state's history. It is not a stretch to say that my collaboration with female professional associations such as FIDA, NAWOJ, and the Female Medical Practitioners has resulted in an increase in the protection and defence of our women and girls' rights.

Our mothers are becoming role models for our daughters and all around the Niger Delta region. This shows that our accomplishments, our journey has only just begun. It is true that in the Niger Delta states we have witnessed female law makers in the House of Representative and the largest number of female law makers in the State Houses of Assemblies. We have also made strides in lowering mother and infant mortality rates in the state thanks to Henry Seriake Dickson's intervention program, which aims to ensure that no woman dies while giving birth. His Excellency at the state's first maternal and infant mortality summit and launch of safe motherhood announced the special safe maternity N3,000 monthly Allowance for all pregnant women in the state all through their pregnancy and also the provision of free medical access to all pregnant women during and post pregnancy. With the rate of this progress for the empowerment, education, health security and the protection of the Niger Delta women and girls, we will in no distant time arrive at our desired destination standing shoulder to shoulder with our peers all over the world. All around the Niger Delta States, rural and urban women are beginning to partner to change the stereotypical narrative of women. Women are beginning to show proof that their capabilities exceed the kitchen. All around the world, it is no longer news that women's advancements in recent decades have been remarkable. The narrative is changing, even faster than we envisaged. In recent times, these states have witnessed a progressive growth in the spring-up of female entrepreneurs. We have young ladies who are rewriting the story of the Niger Delta region. All of these are happening because women have been inspired to be the best as they aspire to reach heights like their peers all around the world.

7. Conclusion

Building towards a gender sensitive and friendly climate cannot be overlooked in this fast-changing environment. Discriminating against women is a clear indication of wasting a productive population of our society. Women constitute a significant size of the population that is potentially viable to engineer positive economic, social and political changes. Therefore, all hands should be on-deck to encourage and promote women's participation in national development. Solutions and prospects for women's involvement and inclusive leadership include developing a flexible culture to accommodate gender parity, equal opportunity laws should be created for all, promoting girl child education through special interventions, an improved healthcare system, equal political and economic benefits, initiating training programmes to create more awareness about gender discrimination and stereotypes, prohibitions against female genital mutilation, domestic violence and sexual harassment against women.

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