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## WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP: WHAT IS THE NOISE ALL ABOUT?

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### Abstract

*The controversy surrounding the issue of women and leadership position is as old as the history and creation of women itself. The issue, if not "liberation of women" from whatever perceived bondage, would be that of "equality with men", or of recent that of "women empowerment". This controversy, would be this heated up if the creation of women and their assigned roles is traced from biblical injunction and that, which is naturally and socially determined. A woman, though as a human being may aspire to what ever height in any chosen field she so desires, should not do so at the expense of the role assigned her by nature for which she is best suited. This view is what the paper would attempt to elucidate to show why energy should not be dissipated on whether women should "fight" what should be the norm rather than exception on leadership matters. After all, what is leadership if placed in its right perspective?*

### INTRODUCTION

The controversy surrounding the issue of women and leadership is as old as the history of creation of not only men but women as well. Leadership, a very important issue in the lives of men and women of old and present times, can be better described than defined. The ease in description rather than definition stems from the age long controversies that have greeted attempts at defining leadership. The encyclopedia of psychology (1975) looks at leadership as generally encompassing the directing, control, and modification of activities of members of a group. But regardless of how leadership is defined, the common theme in the various definitions attempted by various writers and theorists is that it seeks to accomplish goals. The goal accomplishment which leadership seeks to achieve could be said to be dynamic rather than static. This implies that it changes



with time, place, situation and people involved in the leadership. Furthermore, leadership does not connote a particular sex or gender linked orientation, but is a collective aggregate that has an arrowhead in the person (he/she) occupying the position of the leader. Throughout history, leadership has always been talked about with regard to what constitutes effective leadership. Donnel and Hall (1980) while submitting that leadership effectiveness is determined by the assumptions and values leaders hold and the practices they employ, identified five dimensions of effective leadership. These are: 1) leadership philosophy; 2) motivational dynamics; 3) participate practices; 4) interpersonal competence; and 5) – leadership style. Payne and Congemi (1997) in their realization of the dynamic nature of leadership opined that, “for the twenty-first century will require people to use a style of leadership, which incorporates both task and consideration”. The issues raised by these authors are the barometers with which individuals occupying the position of a leader are judged as to their competence and effectiveness. To do otherwise, is to bring instability to the social structure from which leader and leadership derives their very nature. Hence, further discussion on the topic would henceforth make references to the very root from which women derived their assigned or achieved role, i.e. the Holy Bible and the society’s norms, values, culture and beliefs.

### **ORDERLINESS OF NATURE**

God, the author and finisher of our faith says in the book of I Corinthians 14, verse 40 that “let things be done peacefully and in orderliness” (The Holy Bible). He set the pace in creation by creating the world first before putting things in place according to the need of the situation. He then created man last to have dominion over all things (Gen. 1 vs 24 – 27). When He discovered that the work would be too enormous for the man, He then created the woman from the rib of the man as a helper. He then went further to assign duties to them by saying that they should “be fruitful and increase in member, fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every living creature that moves on the ground” (Gen. 1 v 28).

### **SEX OR GENDER ROLES: NATURE OR NURTURE?**

Orderliness, in and of the society derived its nature from creation and from the account of the Bible. Agreed that the same bible tells us in the book of Galatians, chapter 3 v 28 that there is no difference in His creation, no male or female, equal

created Him all, but by nature and for reason of orderliness certain roles, duties and obligations were assigned to different sexes. When God cursed Adam and Eve, He assigned the role of fending for the family to the man and that of procreation to the woman. Even right from birth the Bible makes us to understand that weaning for the male child should be shorter than that of the female because of their peculiar nature. Not only this, the very nature of women as not being strong enough to keep the secret of the society and thereby causing havoc in the society, made Paul to write that women should be seen but not heard and that they should not aspire to leadership position of the church, which is synonymous with the society (1 Tim 2 v 11 - 12). Since most societies derived their values from the Biblical injunctions, it is not surprising that over time some roles have come to be assigned to different sexes. However, it is possible by virtue of prevailing situation for women to assume the role of leadership as seen in the life of Esther and others in the bible, and Mrs. Ransome-kuti, Acquino and Thatcher of Nigeria, the Philippines, and Britain respectively.

#### **PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLANATION**

Evidence from psychological studies show that both the environment and biological endowments contribute to individual personality. By personality, it meant the totality of relatively enduring characteristics that differentiate one person from another. A person is who or what he or she is as a result of his/her natural endowment and/or the kind of situation he or she is exposed to while growing up. While an individual, by nature has certain traits endowed him/her, he/she acquires others through socialization process from the environment to which he/she is exposed. Therefore the characteristics assigned to male and female are not only biologically determined, but also equally determined by their social environment. Hence we have "Feminine" and "Masculine" traits with which individuals are identified.

Differences in manifestation of certain traits and psychological constructs have been accounted for by hormonal differences. Both male and female sex hormones are present in both women and men; it is the relative amount that differs. The organizational role of sex hormones has to do with their effect on the structure of the body and the brain. While a person's sex is inherited, the organization of the body and the brain as either male or female depends on the presence of the appropriate sex hormones during early life in the womb. Not only the body, but



the brain, too, seems to be organized by sex hormones to predispose a person to behave in male or female ways.

Psychological theorists who focus on social structure consider situational factors or other social factors that create observed gender differences. These theorists acknowledge differences in gender behavior and may even stress them (e.g. Eagley, 1995), but their analytic focus is less likely to be directed toward personal attributes. The fact that socio-cultural variables influence scientific findings and procedures has also been noted. Maracek (1995) viewed that the production of knowledge (whether by set of procedures we call science or by any other means) is not set apart from culture but fully part of it. Even when it seems that scientific work "possesses a momentum all of its own", it is forged in the crucible of ongoing cultural concerns, framed within the culture's linguistic codes, and rewarded or neglected in accord with cultural needs. The issue of women in leadership does not appear to be an exception.

#### **WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP**

Leadership abilities (be they in women or men) do not come or develop by accident. They are premeditated by several factors, just like they sometimes stem from situations. Apart from gender differences in certain behavioral manifestations, the fact still remains that these would always follow the way an individual handles leadership along the dimensions identified earlier on. Psychologists, along with other feminist researchers, in the wake of gender activism and equality propositions, have had their fair share in the deliberation on the women and women leadership palaver. Eagly (1995) argues that the outcomes of meta-analysis of psychological gender differences have been misrepresented in textbooks and other sources as indicating that all the psychological gender differences are small, but they still exist. Furthermore, she argues that this misrepresentation and oversimplification is the result of a political climate created by feminists who, motivated by strivings for gender equality favour findings of no gender difference. The position of no gender differences or small differences has been referred to by Eagly (1995) and others as *minimalist perspective*. The perspective of large psychological gender differences is referred to as the *maximalist perspective*. One fact that has not been disputed so far is that there are indeed gender differences. So why the noise or this over excitement in proving that women should be allowed into positions of leadership?

Given the fact that leadership can be identified along five dimensions which influenced or are influenced by the behavior

of the occupant of a leader, one then wonders why the argument since evidence abound that gives credence to the fear in certain quarters as to the effectiveness of women leaders. Gilligan (1982) who shares the maximalist view theorized that there are large and fundamental gender differences in moral reasoning. Males, according to her theory, are far less likely to reason using justice perspective whereas females are more likely to use a care perspective. In other words, males are more disposed to issues of justice as they border on punishment and reward while women are more concerned with issues of emotionality such as care giving and love. After all, this is what nature endowed them with. Tannen (1990) argued that there are large differences between women and men in conversational style and meaning, and this has implication for leadership style, where women would like to talk things out and men would prefer action. This work has been popular with researchers in psychology and communications.

A relevant variable, especially to the issue of leadership, the motive to avoid success (or, more commonly, the fear of success) was introduced by Horner (1972) and receive considerable attention inside and outside academic psychology. Horner (1972) found a gender difference in the expression of the need for achievement. He noticed a 65% fear of success in women and just about 10% of same in men. The fear of success in women relates to their fear that their successful performance would have negative consequences such as unpopularity and a reduced feeling of femininity. For example, Udegbe (1997) during the presentation of her **FACULTY LECTURE** at the Social Science Faculty, University of Ibadan titled "Gender and leadership: images and reality", quickly pointed out, and I quote: "Mr. Dean Sir, before I go into the main body of this lecture, permit me to clarify the obvious impression that might have been created by this topic ..... The title of this presentation is not a response to my current position as the acting Head of Department of Psychology, or to the fact that I happen to be the first female acting head in the faculty of the social sciences; rather it is based on my past, present and future research interests". Whose obvious impression, if I may ask? If not the expression of fear of success.

Perhaps, one may conclude that both men and women may desire promotions, power, and fruits of success, but they may fear the increased competition, corporate politics, higher expectations and greater worries that come along with success. Understanding how these fears interact with need for



achievement should help us predict who will succeed and who will falter in the competitive, political and leadership world.

Women have nothing to fear but themselves. Udegbe (1997) reported a study in her lecture about the perception of women leaders among middle and top managers and professionals. The sample consists of both males and females. About 90% of them indicated that they had worked with male bosses while 70.7% had worked with a female boss or female bosses. She found that there was perceived gender differences in leadership where female leaders were perceived as more wicked/harsh (34.2%), emotional (15.2%), while males are more flexible and accommodating (13.9%). The subjects perceived certain obstacles to females' successful leadership such as being boss/rigid, feelings of inferiority/low self-perception, and pride/arrogance. When she compared qualities that can enhance successful leadership in women with characteristics of successful leaders, two factors stood out i.e. caring/relationship and honesty/integrity (all "feminine" traits). The interesting thing is that this perception of female leaders were almost equally shared by both sexes, if one goes by the factor analysis she performed on a scale measuring attitude towards women. Somewhere in the lecture, she observed that where women gained privileged positions such as first ladies or chairperson of "F.S.P." (Family Support Programme), rather than promote the cause of women, they further perpetrate marginalization of their female counterparts. So, what is the noise about on women leadership?

Weiner (1970) examined extensively the relationship between attributions and achievement, and found out that we often ask ourselves in an achievement situation why we have done well or as poorly as we have done. The answer to this question then determines how we feel about the performance and what we will do in similar situations in the future. If women have asked in the past, as some of them seem to be asking at present, why they have done as poorly in the leadership, the answer to this question may then determine how they will feel about their performance and what they will do in similar situations in the future. The solution lies in the willingness of the female gender to learn how to accept the present and plan to take the future using their relative advantages whenever situation calls for it, not by shouting blue murder from the roof top. For example, Jouvard (1971) found that American men's role require them to be tough, objective, striving, unsentimental, and emotionally unexpressive; whereas females tend to disclose more intimately and to more people. His study then suggested that women are

seen as most well adjusted and are liked the most, when they disclose within the appropriate societal roles for their gender. But this is limiting on people's ability to be self-expressive. We would rather call for individuals to be/become what they want as dictated by the prevailing circumstance(s), within their own endowment. After all, this is what leadership suggested.

The controversy surrounding women and leadership is so pronounced, based on the fact that when psychologists publish researches that compare the behavior of women and men, they face political as well as scientific issues. From a theoretical viewpoint on sex differences and similarities; the social-role theory sees the root cause of sex-correlated expectations as being that women and men are differently distributed into family and occupational roles in the society. Evolutionary psychology focuses primarily on behaviours closely related to production (e.g. male selection), whereas social psychological and developmental theories focus on wider variety of behaviours.

The common description of empirical research as showing that sex-related differences are small, usually unstable across studies, very often artificial, and inconsistent with gender stereotypes arose in part from a feminist commitment to gender similarity as a route to political equality. It also arose from piecemeal and inadequate differences in the context of other psychological research and often implied that findings were very ordinary (in terms of magnitude, consistency, etc.) rather than exceptional.

The fear often expressed in feminist writing is that differences became deficiencies for women because women are an oppressed group. Anxiety about sex differences is especially strong to the extent that scientists favour biological explanations because this approach might produce a portrayal of women as innately inferior to men. Yet, contemporary research that has systematically examined whether the traits and behaviors ascribed to women are regarded as inferior to those ascribed to men has not found evidence for this generalized unfavourable perception of women. The favourability of the female stereotype may be mixed blessing because the particular kinds of positive characteristics most often ascribed to women, primarily "niceness-nurturance" qualities, probably contribute to the exclusion of women from certain kinds of high-status leadership roles (e.g. those that are thought to require toughness and aggressiveness).

Rather than sit down or go about making noise in the name of feminism and women liberation, women need to seek out specific training programmes designed to increase their



dominance (e.g. assertiveness training). Knowledge of men's more dominant behavior could contribute to exclusion of women from some kinds of leadership roles. Which type of outcome would predominate would depend on many factors, including the strength of the women's desire to change their status, their political power, and their interest in using psychological research to help them effect change.

## **CONCLUSION**

The noise about women and leadership has been so loud and so very attention-catching that it is difficult to dismiss it with a wave of the hand. Never before in the history of psychology (an indeed the other behavioral science disciplines and Law) has such a formidable body of scientific information (as sex differences) encountered such a powerful political agenda. This has been a concern to many psychologists who believe that psychology should serve human welfare as it advances scientific understanding.

The study of creation, the entire Bible itself, as well as socio-physiological and psychological findings (both past and present) has shown similarities as well as differences among and between men and women. These similarities and differences among and between men and women have been noticed for ages; they are known to influence physiological, psychological, and social functioning. To assert that the physical and psychological attributes men and women have and the cultural variables they are exposed to, do not influence their leadership ability and style will therefore amount to demeaning their significance.

Leadership is such a dynamic and intricate phenomenon that those who are engaged in it cannot help but brings their social, physiological and psychological make-ups to bear on it. Biblically and socially, a woman is not prevented from aspiring to whatever height in any chosen field she desires. This, however, should not be done outside the framework of the injunctions provided by the Bible. Neither should it be outside the frameworks provided by biological and other socially acceptable differences. Inasmuch as women have a case to make concerning their involvement in leadership, doing so in a volatile and unduly speedy manner raises suspicion as to their motives for doing so.

Leadership is known to differ in style and arguably change with situations. And based on the fact that a weakness associated with a particular aspect of women's leadership could be compensated for by strength with a particular aspect of men's

leadership (and vice-versa), it is more logical to look at the involvement of the two sexes as being complementary rather than competitive. The Bible's reference to woman as a helper does not in any way imply inferiority (of woman). Rather it implies understanding, cooperation and mutual respect. This fact is more crystal if one looks at the various injunctions God gave to man concerning his relationship with women (his wife).

Women equality, empowerment and leadership struggle is noticeably becoming a way of life. The various questions that an attentive listener of the noise could ask concerning this politically motivated and income-generating struggle are: what level of equality for women? What manner of empowerment; and freedom from which bondage?

Far from being negotiated and attained through consensus, leadership positions (if performance must be ensured) are reached by merit. The ability to find one's way into leadership positions and remain there is part of the art (of leadership). A reliance on negotiation, consensus and foul cry to attain leadership positions is therefore an indication of unreadiness, incompetence and non-mastery of the art on the part of women. To engage in self-fulfilling prophecy (of inability to succeed in leadership) is as suicidal as to engage in attempts at overcompensating or over-struggling. To also attempt to redefine the laws of creation is not only to attempt to bring the world to destruction, but equally call the Bible (which recognizes differences between men and women) bluff.

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