

Women's Leadership in Ethiopian Higher Education: Development, Contribution, Quality and Preference

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Abstract

Women are underrepresented in higher education leadership across the world and Ethiopia is no exception. Although women leadership in Ethiopian higher education is a relatively new practice, its development has not been well examined. The present paper aims to address this lacuna by examining women senior leadership development, contribution, quality and preference based on the views and experiences of twelve women senior leaders drawn from ten public universities. The participants are current and past vice presidents at public universities of different generations and types. The results indicate that although women have made significant progress in gaining senior leadership positions, senior leadership remains to be a men's club where women are rarely invited. The results also reveal that women have perceived leadership quality and contributions. The findings show that among the various senior leadership positions women prefer and assume a research and community service vice president position and this goes to the extent of associating this position with women. The results suggest that enhancing women leadership development requires providing training, mentoring and other opportunities specifically aimed at advancing women to senior leadership positions, and ensuring sustainability of women leadership development programs.

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Introduction

Enhancing quality in higher education and addressing social responsibilities requires higher education institutions (HEIs) to have strong leadership because effective leadership is central to a HEIs' success (Braun et al., 2009; Hofmeyer, Sheingold, Klopper, & Warland, 2015). This makes leadership one of the most important aspects that need to be taken into consideration for any institution's future (Council for Excellence in Management and Leadership, 2001). Leading a HEI is not an easy task and it is becoming increasingly demanding and challenging in this day and age for different reasons, among others, the expansion of programs and student numbers, expectation of the society, and expectation to deal with not only national but also global issues (Black 2015; Gilmore, Hirschorn & Kelly, 1999; Kezar & Holcombe, 2017; Rumbley, Helms, Peterson, & Altbach, 2014). It is even more challenging in a country like Ethiopia where

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HEIs are not well-funded and do not have a well-developed infrastructure and well-paid and highly qualified staff. Higher education leaders are also expected to lead wisely which encompasses a balance between their philosophies, vision, knowledge, and exceed daily challenges and political tussles (Portugal, 2006). Coping with such challenges and addressing demands of stakeholders require self-motivated, experienced and knowledgeable higher education leaders (Adamu, 2019). This in turn requires universities to build the capacity of academic leaders to address the increasing challenge they face (Dinh, Caliskan & Zhu, 2020) and achieve their mission and vision.

Higher education leadership is not gender specific and 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 and this continues in the twenty-first century (Airini et al, 2011; Burkinshaw, Cahill & Ford, 2018; Chance, 2021; McTavish & Miller, 2009; Shepherd, 2017), and this goes even to the extent of raising a question “can women lead?” (BlackChen, 2015). Although the underrepresentation of women is at all levels of leadership, but their underrepresentation is much higher at senior level of leadership (Shepherd, 2017; Burkinshaw, Cahill & Ford, 2018). If it continues with 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).

Scholars also noted and emphasized the importance of greater representation of women in leadership (Longman, 2018; Madsen & Longman, 2020). The need for more women leaders in higher education should not be driven by mere inclusion and gender representation which is more of a social justice. Increasing the proportion of women in leadership positions contributes to different educational and financial benefits of HEIs (Cheung, 2021). The higher education sector needs to be aware of the immense contribution of women's advancement in higher education leadership for the sector, its stakeholders and the society at large (Airini et al, 2011).

In the Ethiopian higher education context, until 2018 the Ministry of Education (MoE) was responsible for all levels of education in Ethiopia. However, in 2018 the government established the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MoSHE) which had 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, MoSHE was merged with MoE.

In Ethiopia, there are about 46 public universities and 270 private universities and colleges answerable to MoE. In public universities the selection and appointment of senior (top-level) leaders involves 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 which have a clear directive on the selection and appointment of leaders and managers in HEIs (MoSHE, 2018). 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. MoE

also selects and appoints the board chairperson and three additional members directly and the remaining three in consultation with the university (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 president and vice-president positions which are selected based on merits and involves the participation of the university community in the process of search and selection.

Comparatively speaking, women leadership in higher education in most developed and some developing countries has been a widely researched topic. However, women leadership in Ethiopian higher education is a topic which is under researched. This is despite the fact that there are several issues that need to be examined. Hence, this study aims to explore the perceptions, views and experiences of senior women leaders regarding the development, contribution, quality and preference of women leadership in higher education in Ethiopia.

Methods

The study used a phenomenological research design to better understand women's leadership development in higher education from the views and 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, 2020).

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 one, five from generation two, three from generation three, one from generation four) and the three types of universities (three research universities, seven universities of applied sciences and two comprehensive universities). During the data generation period there were only two women university presidents with less than six-month leadership experience. Therefore, data was generated from 12 women who are either currently or in the past occupied vice-president positions. Four of the vice-presidents were holding office while the other three finished their term, and the other five did not finish their term 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. Data were also collected through document review. Official documents such as the proclamation on the definition of powers and duties of the executive organs of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, the higher education proclamation, 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 (HETSAS-I), the science, and higher education and training sector's ten-year development plan were consulted. Data generated from these documents were often used to substantiate the data obtained through interview.

Reflexive thematic analysis is a very helpful approach to better understand people's experiences, views, opinions and perceptions. Accordingly, this study used reflexive thematic analysis to explore the perceptions, views and experiences of women senior leaders regarding the women leadership in higher education in Ethiopia.

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

Results and Discussion

The Rise of Women to Senior Leadership

Leadership in Ethiopian higher education was not given enough emphasis in terms of selection, appointment and reporting. Since the establishment of the first higher education institution in 1950, the selection and appointment of senior leaders had been the responsibility of the government. Even though the immediate past higher education proclamation (Proclamation No. 650/2009) states that public universities have the autonomy to nominate senior leaders, this was not practiced at all. Instead, senior leadership appointment was mainly based on ethnicity, locality and political affiliation (Adamu, 2019). Until 2017, leadership in higher education was not also one of the educational issues reported in the education statistics annual abstracts which were published by the Ministry of Education.

Document review indicated that for about six decades it was rare to see women in senior leadership positions. This was a reality despite the fact that the education sector had a female minister who was one of the longest serving ministers in Ethiopia (1992-2006). In most of those years, the focus of the Ministry was widening female access to higher education, and improving the number of women academic staff. In those years, the number of female academic staff was very small and most of them had lower and middle level educational qualifications. As a result, almost all senior leadership positions were occupied by men. This trend created the "think leader, think male" mindset (Catalyst, 2007) among the higher education community and beyond and laid the foundation for many challenges for women leadership.

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. As of 2021, only two (4%) of the

presidents in the 46 public universities are women. These figures clearly show the significant underrepresentation of women in senior leadership. However, it is important to note that the data also shows increasing participation of women in higher education leadership compared to a decade ago, when the participation of women in senior leadership was almost nil.

Table 1

Leadership Positions in Ethiopian Public Universities (2017/18-2019/20)

Leadership position	2017/18		2018/19		2019/20		Total	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
Board	14.7	85.3	23.9	76.1	30.7	69.3	23.1	76.9
Top level	10.5	89.5	12.4	87.6	11.4	88.6	11.4	88.6
Mid-level	8.3	91.7	10.0	90.0	15.1	84.9	11.1	88.9
Total	11.2	88.8	15.4	84.6	19.1	80.9	15.2	84.8

Note: Data compiled from the HETSAS-I (MoSHE, 2021).

There are different direct and indirect factors contributing to the increasing number of women in senior leadership roles in higher education in Ethiopia. These include an increased number of female students and academic staff, the appointment of women as cabinet members, self-motivation, and encouragement from senior leaders.

Increased Number of Female Students and Academic Staff

The expansion of higher education in Ethiopia in the last two decades has led to increasing numbers of female students. As can be seen from Table 2, in the last three years, there has been an increased number of female students at all levels of study. Compared to male students, the enrollment of female students at bachelor level is better than their enrollment at masters and PhD levels, and their enrollment at PhD level is better than their enrollment at the master's level of study. Despite the number of female students, there is still a significant difference between male and female students at all levels of study.

Table 2

Regular and Non-regular Students Enrolled in Public Universities (2017/18-2019/20)

Levels of study	2017/18		2018/19		2019/20		Total	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
Bachelor	34.1	65.9	36.1	63.9	36.4	63.6	35.5	64.5
Masters	17.0	83.0	16.5	83.5	18.9	81.1	17.5	82.5
PhD	18.6	81.4	18.8	81.2	21.9	78.1	19.8	80.2
Total	23.2	76.8	23.8	76.2	25.7	74.3	24.3	75.7

Note: Data compiled from HETSAS-I (MoSHE, 2021)

Participants indicated that one of the good strategies to have more women leaders in higher education is through expanding the pool of highly competent female academic staff which requires rising the overall access of women to higher education as students and improving the number of female academic staff with high educational qualification and work experience.

Table 3

Academic Staff of Ethiopian Public Universities by Qualification (2017/18-2019/20)

Educational qualification	2017/18		2018/19		2019/20		Total	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
Bachelor	20.2	79.8	21.6	78.4	26.6	73.4	22.8	77.2
Masters	11.5	88.5	13.9	86.1	19.0	81.0	14.8	85.2
PhD	7.7	92.3	6.8	93.2	15.5	84.5	10.0	90.0
Total	13.1	86.9	14.1	85.9	20.4	79.6	15.9	84.1

Note: Data compiled from the HETSAS-I (MoSHE, 2021).

The above data indicates a slight increase in the number of female academic staff in the last three academic years. However, the number of female academic staff is still by far lower than the number of male academic staff. In recent years, males outnumber females about 3:1 as bachelor holders, 6:1 as master's holder; and 9:1 as PhD holders. This clearly shows that as the level of educational qualification increases the share of women decreases. In spite of this limitation, participants strongly noted that an increased number of highly qualified female academic staff (i.e., female academic staff with PhD) have contributed to the rise in the number of women senior leaders. Supporting this, one of the research participants reported the following:

If universities want to increase the number of women leaders, it is a must to have a pool of highly qualified female academic staff to choose from. As you may have noted, in recent years, the number of female students and female academic staff has risen compared to let's say that we had some ten years ago. This contributes to having more female academic staff which is an opportunity to have more women for senior leadership roles. (VP2A)

The above excerpt emphasized the importance of an increased number of female students and academic staff which could be considered as one of the preconditions for having more women in leadership roles. It also implies that an increased number of female academic staff is the basis for having more qualified female academic staff who are potentially interested to take up leadership roles. Qualification and academic rank are the major criteria and requirements for senior leadership positions as clearly stated in the directive on the selection and appointment of leaders. Out of a total of 100 points, qualification and academic rank has 30 and 25 points for the president and vice-president positions respectively.

The Appointment of Women as Cabinet Members

In 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took office and appointed a new cabinet which is composed of 50% women. As a result, Ethiopia ranked 97th in the Global Gender Gap Index 2021, and it ranked at the 28th position in terms of political empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2018). Participants of the present study argued that the much-lauded cabinet appointments in one way or another have influenced regional governments and ministers to bring more women to different leadership positions in different sectors, and the higher education sector was no different. One of the female ministers appointed by the Prime Minister was the minister of MoSHE. Soon after she took office, she appointed several women ministers and state ministers as chairperson and member of the Board of public universities. Participants indicated that this has indirectly contributed to the selection and appointment of women vice-presidents, because the vice-presidents are appointed by a university Board. Participants also noted that the political vibe, the quality and personality of people at the ministry and university board coupled with availability of qualified female academic staff in higher education contributed to a relative rise in the number of women leaders.

The Appointment of a Woman Minister for Higher Education

The fact that the founding minister of MoSHE is a woman not only positively affects the number of women senior leaders but also their leadership effectiveness. Participants noted that she was inspirational and motivates them to be active and visible. They also thought that she tried to empower them through providing training opportunities and creating a network of women leaders. In support of this, study participants said the following:

I don't know what research says, but from my short and recent observation, having a woman minister contributes to empowering women and bringing them to senior leadership. There is no doubt about that. If there are females at the top, gender will be one of their main agenda. We witnessed this when we had a woman minister. At that time our [women senior leaders] number increased, and we had an opportunity to create a network of female leaders. After she left, everything stalled and the number of women board members and senior leaders in many universities is decreasing. I am not saying that the minister should always be a woman, which is impossible. I am just telling you what happened when we had a woman minister. A good male minister could probably do the same. (VP8B)

I can say that more than ever before the participation of women as vice president and board members has gained momentum when we had a female minister. After she [the minister] left her position, the number of females at Board level significantly decreased. Many women Vice-presidents have also left their positions either because of the end of their term or open and systematic pressure. If I take myself as an example, I didn't want to leave the position but I was forced to leave. (VP9B)

Evidence also showed that following the appointment of a new male minister of MoSHE, in the 2020/21 academic year, there was a new university board member appointment in almost all public universities which resulted in a significant decrease in female university board members. As the participants indicated, this is partly related to the departure of the female minister. Their argument regarding the decreased number of women vice presidents is also visible. The highest number of women senior leaders in 45 public universities was 26 in the 2018/2019 academic year (MoSHE, 2021). At the end of the 2020/2021 academic year there were about 19 women senior leaders in 42 public universities.

One of the contributions of the appointment of a founding women minister for MoSHE is the attempt to address gender related issues in the selection and appointment of senior leaders in Ethiopian public universities. This was clearly indicated in the revised directive. The first example in relation to this is the inclusion of gender quota. The directive clearly states that “every higher education institution shall have at least two females in its senior management” (MoSHE, 2018, p. 5). The second example is an applicant for senior leadership positions should have the highest educational qualification (i.e., doctoral degree or equivalent). It is only in exceptional conditions that an applicant with a master's degree coupled with substantial experience could be considered. In spite of these provisions, as an effort to ascent women academics to senior leadership positions, the revised directive provides opportunities for women with master's degrees to apply and compete.

As indicated in the above discussion, participants believe that the appointment of a woman leader as a minister has a positive relationship with an increased number of women senior leaders in public universities. They also noted that the quality and attitude of the person in charge of the ministry is the main factor and more important than the gender of the minister.

Self-motivation and Determination

With the exception of one vice president, all participants of the present study have previously served in the lower or mid-level leadership positions. Most of them are also the first women vice presidents in their respective universities. They have reached this level in a context where there is no female senior leader to take as a role model. And that resonates well with Cheung's (2021) observation that most pioneer women leaders in higher education “have made their way to the top in their own right in mostly gender-blind contexts” (p.7).

In a higher education context where women's senior leadership is less likely to be accepted by the university community and the broader society, thinking about and deciding to take up leadership roles requires women's higher self-motivation. Although there are different context-specific factors that motivate women to take up leadership positions (Maheshwari & Nayak, 2020; McTavish & Miller, 2009), self-motivation is one of the essential and common factors for women to take up leadership roles (Hum, 2000; Maheshwari, 2021). Participants of the study said that one of the reasons for the increase in the number of women senior leaders is the increasing self-motivation and determination of women. Though stated different, the following remarks from study participants reflect rising motivation on the part of women leaders:

As a teacher and mid-level leader, I have seen several problems that need to be addressed by senior leaders. At that time, I said if I had been a vice president, I would have solved these problems in this way and I would have done this and that. When I applied for the position, I now hold, my main motive was solving the problems that I have identified and improving the university's performance at least in relation to research. (VP1F)

There were several gaps that I saw. I want to address those gaps by becoming a vice president. If you ask me my main motives for taking senior leadership roles, first, it is my ambition to send a statement that "we can!" I want to prove to the community that women can be not only leaders but also good leaders. Secondly, I want to be a good role model and inspire other female academics to take leadership roles. (VP6C)

The above excerpts imply that in the Ethiopian higher education context, there are three major factors that motivated women to take senior leadership roles. These include women's ambition to address the problem they see and face, and the determination to prove their leadership capacity.

Although the directive states that every university shall have at least two women at senior leadership positions, this was not mentioned as a factor contributing to the increasing number of women in senior leadership roles because this quota approach has not been effectively executed.

Perceived Women's Contribution

The contribution of the incumbent women senior leaders to achieving the envisioned vision and mission of their respective university is one of the major issues discussed in relation to women's leadership in Ethiopia. Participants of the present study also indicated that the outcome of their leadership roles is a double-edged sword. If they are effective, they will not only contribute towards achieving the vision and mission of their university but also become role models and inspire female academic staff in many ways. This is a unique contribution of women as leaders (Adu-Yeboah, Oduro & Takyiakwa, 2021; Li & Kam, 2021). As discussed above most of them are the first women vice presidents in their respective universities and a study showed that women leaders who were the first to take senior leadership in their universities often act as role models and champions for the next generation of female leaders (Cheung, 2021).

Participants also asserted that the negative impact of women leaders' failure or unsuccessful story on female academic staff is more than the negative impact of the failure or unsuccessful story of men leaders on male academic staff. This is related to the trend of more female academic staff looking for role models than male academic staff and which in turn is associated with the small number of women leaders in higher education.

The result of the present study also indicated that although women senior leaders are small in number, most of them strongly believe that they are effective in their leadership roles. This assertion is well substantiated with the following quotes from study participants.

Though we are small in number, our contribution is very good and I think we have shown enough what we are capable of doing in leadership. (VP1A)

Females are very productive and dedicated to their leadership. The contribution could vary from person to person, university to university and position to position, but generally speaking our contribution is remarkable. (VP6C)

I think we have contributed better than our male counterparts. I can say that we were productive and efficient. (VP3I)

It may not be all, but most of us were very successful and contributed a lot and have shown that we can do what is required of us at the top-level. (VP5D)

The contribution of female leaders in Ethiopia is considerable. I think most of us are successful despite all the challenges we are facing. (VP7E)

In addition to the general factors that contribute to leadership effectiveness such as good leadership knowledge and skills, the present study indicated that women's contribution could also vary depending on how they are appointed. As clearly indicated in the study context, until recently leadership appointment was mainly based on locality and to some extent political affiliation. Even in such a context, women were not preferred to take up senior leadership roles. This is 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. At that time, the contributions of leaders were not often associated with the way they are appointed. However, when women are appointed to senior leadership positions without open competition, their contribution and effectiveness are scrutinized and always tied to the way they are appointed. Sometimes this is even regardless of the merit and capacity of the appointed women leaders. In relation to this, one of the study participants had the following to say:

It is always good to appoint leaders through open competition. But there have been cases where leaders were directly appointed by the ministry or the board as an acting or on a permanent basis for a given term. In this case, they may appoint a person with good leadership quality and experience who could have potentially won had it even been in open competition. This person could be a man or a woman. The problem is if it is a woman the community immediately associates her appointment with being a woman instead of trying to look at and understand her capacity. This really and heavily affects women's contributions as leaders. (VP5D)

Another participant agrees,

For a woman who is appointed on a non-competitive basis, it is very difficult to be an effective leader no matter how knowledgeable she may be. Because in the first place, the community believes that she can't be a good leader; therefore, they are not ready to support and collaborate with her. Some people may become obstacles in different ways and make her unhappy with her leadership. As I understood from discussions that I had with women in similar positions at other universities, despite

the challenges associated with femininity, competing for office has its own greater impact on our performance and success as a leader. (VP9B)

The above excerpts imply that for different reasons including effectiveness, it would be better if women leaders are elected than appointed. Previous study indicated that although elected leaders are slightly more influential than the appointed leader (Hollander, Fallon, & Edwards, 1977), being elected or appointed has no significant difference on leadership effectiveness (Partridge & Sass, 2011) as long as it is based on merit. Yet, the current study brings another dimension to this discussion which is the importance of context. In the Ethiopian context, because of past experiences, the higher education community does not have a positive attitude even towards merit based direct appointment. Participants argued that this approach has negative impacts on leaders' contribution and effectiveness, and this is more evident on women than men leaders.

Perceived Leadership Qualities as a Basis for Holding Senior Positions

Participants of the present study indicated that most male senior leaders consider women's leadership primarily as a strategy to achieve gender inclusion. Although measures to redress the gender imbalance in higher education leadership is important, participants strongly argued that it should not be the driving force for increasing the number of women leaders. They also argued that they possess many leadership qualities that contribute to effective implementations of visions and missions of universities, and thus the intentions and measures to appoint women leaders should focus on the contributions that they can offer HEIs (Airini et al, 2011). In support of this, the study participants had the following to say:

I wish there is a study on this but I believe that in our country, women are better than men in terms of taking leadership responsibilities. This could be associated with taking major responsibility in their own family as a mother. Men have more friends, social networks than women and they don't want to lose this, and sometimes this affects what they do and decide as a leader. (VP1A)

We are good at negotiation, dealing with problems and creating a better and smooth working environment; we are not as aggressive as men; we try to address different issues in the best possible way though this may take more time than expected, and some people may consider this approach as lack of confidence in decision making. (VP10G)

Participants also described other characteristics/traits they possess and are necessary for an effective leadership, among others, integrity, ability to work under pressure and adapt to change, high determination and professional commitment, high sociability, less biased and corrupt, more caring, better at multitasking and resource management, considering being a role model as a responsibility, and paying attention to details. Some of these qualities are echoed in survey results of the Pew Research Center survey in which women are ranked better than or equal to men in seven of eight primary leadership qualities - honesty, intelligence, hardworking, ambitious,

compassionate, outgoing and creative (Pew Research Center, 2008). A study by Zenger and Folkman (2019) also indicated that women have better leadership skills than men.

The other quality and contribution that women can offer universities is the inclusion of gender dimension to leadership which is not often the interest and main focus of most men leaders. While describing their leadership experiences, participants often bring the gender perspective of leadership which is very important to ensure inclusion and understand different issues from different perspectives. In general terms, women leaders in higher education in Ethiopia possess some of the most important traits (determination, sociability, integrity) of an effective leader as described by Northouse (2009).

Leadership Position Preference

In most public universities there are at least five senior level leadership positions - president, academic vice president (AVP), research and community service vice president (RCSVP), administrative and student affairs vice president, and business and development vice president. All vice president positions are equal and answerable to the president. However, the present study showed that the university community thinks that the AVP position is higher than the other vice president positions. This could be associated with first, the AVP is prioritized to be delegated in the absence of the president. The higher education proclamation also clearly states that “in the case of absence from duty, the president shall delegate, as a standard practice, the AVP on his behalf and, in the case of simultaneous absence of the said vice president, any of the other vice presidents” (FDRE, 2019). Second, teaching learning, which is the main responsibility of the AVP office, is considered as the priority mission of universities compared to other missions – research and community services. Third, compared to other vice president positions the AVP has more university level responsibilities including academic promotion, academic staff employment and disciplinary actions and closely working with the registrar office in the preparation of an academic calendar. Fourth, from experience, mostly people who were AVPs are often interested in becoming a president.

Although it is not written anywhere and talked about in public, the RCSVP position is often considered as the easiest vice president position. Participants’ observations also echo these unwritten perceptions. Explaining their reasons for that, they remark:

I think this position is easier than other positions. The main reason for this is that this position does not have much to do with student related issues. In our [country] context, a position which is considered as difficult is a position that has much to do with student affairs. The other reason is since there is not much external and internal research fund [the research budget is less than 5% of the total annual budget] and activities to manage, the [research and community service] vice president does not have frequent interaction with academic staff. These are some of the reasons that make this position relatively easier than other positions. (VP4H)

In principle, this [RCSVP’s] work is not as simple as it may seem. In practice, as many people think, this position is said to be easier than the vice presidents in charge of academic

affairs, administrative affairs and business and development. This is despite the fact that this position is responsible for two of the three core missions of universities. Here, I would like to emphasize that it is the context that makes this position look easier. (VP8B)

The above assertion is irrespective of the generation and types of universities in the country. In Ethiopia, universities often appoint women as RCSVP. Women academic staff also prefer and run for this position, and most of the participants of this study also hold this position. There may be various reasons why women prefer this leadership position, but according to the present study the following are the main reasons. First, some years ago, there were no RCSVP positions in universities. Research activities were under AVP and almost all president and AVP positions were held by men. Women started to come to senior leadership positions when the RCSVP position was included in the public universities' structure, and most of them were appointed as vice president of this position. Second, the board, the president, the community and even female academic staff tend to believe that this is less challenging and good for women who have not been in senior leadership positions for decades. Reflective of that trend two participants have this to say:

We [women] often choose a research and community service vice president position. This is not because we are not able to take up other leadership roles. I believe we can, but it is always good to start with what you think is easier and less challenging. I think the board, the people and we [women] also think so. Yet, this does not mean that the research and community service vice president role is too easy; it is not. (VP5D)

We prefer the one with less challenge and I think compared to other positions research and community service [VP position] is less challenging. It is not only us but also the ministry and the university community also believe that this [RCSVP] is good for females. If you look at the trend there are many females who have served in this position and still many females compete for this position. (VP9B)

The above excerpts clearly indicate that as most women are the first senior leaders in their respective universities, both the university community and women believe that it is better to take on a leadership position which is assumed to be less challenging.

Third, most women, who were appointed as the first senior leaders in their respective universities, were RCSVPs. Most of those who applied for this position were also successful. This has influenced many female academic staff to be interested in this position because they have someone who already proved that they can be successful and are more likely to be elected to this position. This goes to the extent of associating women leaders with this position. In a relation to that a participant reflects on her own experience as follows,

When someone introduces me as a vice president without mentioning my specific position, instead of asking me which vice president position I hold, many people take for granted that I am a research and community service vice president. This

clearly shows how much this position is being associated with women leaders. (VP6C)

The above discussion indicates that women prefer easier senior leadership positions and universities also tend to believe that for different reasons this is a position where they are comfortable with and happy to take. It is interesting to see if this trend and practice will continue at research universities where research is their main mission and focus.

Conclusion

In recent years, women have made significant progress in gaining senior leadership positions. The rise in women's access to higher education as a student and academic staff, women academic's self-motivation and determination, the appointment of women cabinet, and the appointment of a female as minister of science and higher education are some of the major direct and indirect factors that contributed to the rise of women at senior leadership positions. The development of women in higher education senior leadership positions from almost nil participation to 11.4% is palpable, but the result showed that women are still significantly underrepresented at senior leadership. It can be argued that in Ethiopian higher education, senior leadership remains to be a men's club where women are rarely invited. The study also revealed that women believe they have good leadership qualities and they also believe they have contributed to achieving the vision and missions of their respective universities, and the development of women leadership, particularly in terms of being a role model for female academic staff. This implies that the intention of increasing women's leadership participation should go beyond achieving inclusion, because they have much to contribute at the highest level. Taking a leadership position where one could feel comfortable and become more successful is a good thing, but associating a leadership position with gender is not a good practice and trend. Higher education needs more women leaders at any type and level of leadership because they are good leaders.

Female academics' interest in leadership is one of the good practices of the higher education sector that significantly contributes to women leadership development. The government and universities need to advance women leadership development by providing training, mentoring and other opportunities specifically aimed at advancing women to senior leadership positions. Studies also emphasized the need for women leadership development programs more than ever before (Madsen, Longman, & Daniels, 2012; Gandhi & Sen, 2021). The government also needs to ensure the sustainability of women leadership development programs which are often project based and have limited lifespan.

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