LIVED EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN WITH PHDs IN KENYA

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Abstract

The status of women across regions varies significantly. This is as a result of the uneven socio-economic development and the social, cultural and religious beliefs on the female gender. The state of women is affected by existing patriarchal systems across the world. In Africa, education for girls has been categorically pointed out as a means to fighting the existing forces of patriarchy. Emphasis on girl education has seen women, more than ever before, pursue higher education with the goal of achieving fulfilling professional and personal lives. Despite this milestone, the ability to realize the goals has played out differently in terms of their experiences of meaningful work, professional accomplishments, opportunities for career growth, compatibility of work and personal life. With specific reference to Kenya, this study explored perceptions, expectations and experiences of women with higher education qualifications (PhD) within the structures of the family, socio-economic, and cultural structures of the society. The study used mixed method approach utilizing both quantitative survey and qualitative research methods. Data was collected using questionnaires and focus group discussions. Findings show that the gender stereotypes and old paradigms still exist within the society. While the society superficially portrays highly educated women as knowledgeable and respectable members, the study found that female PhD holders still suffer gender related challenges from immediate family and their work places. The study concludes that achieving gender equality is not only about access to learning, but much more broadly, it is about challenging the learning environments, the attitudes, and the gender ideologies in the society.

Key words: *Higher education, Gender, Women with Doctoral degrees, career women*

Introduction

While countries across the world are working to make it easier for women to thrive in higher-education positions, gender gaps still persist. Gender equality is featured as one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that need to be met for the world to rid itself of the main challenges such as poverty and diseases. Developing countries lag behind in achieving this goal where only 30.5% percent of labor force is women (ILO 2018). Achievement of this goal is closely related to goal no. 4 of SDG which is 'to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'.

Women participation in higher education is critical in achievement of these two goals (Cazes & Verick (2013). First, because they form more than half of the population and secondly because they are generally underrepresented at higher education institutions as students, employees and in governance roles (Partnership for Higher Education 2003).

In the African traditional context, a woman's obligation is considered to be in the home: studying and pursuing a higher academic degree is a man's path (ILO 2018). These practice is based on conservative views, such as the man being the head of the family, and that pre-occupation with career and work is the main cause of problems in the family. In Kenya, despite the effort that has been made to promote girl child education, the number of women holding higher degrees or key positions in private and public institutions still remains lower compared to men (Otunga and Ojwang, 2002). The report by the Kenya Commission for University Education (CUE) during the 2016/2017 period show a higher gender disparity in the ranks of professor, associate professor and senior lecturer in both public and private universities than the ranks of lecturer, assistant lecturer and graduate assistant. For example, among the proportion of all academic staff with PhDs, 71 per cent were male. The scenario is replicated across all the other ranks with male representation standing at over 60 per cent. This shows that as academic staff move up higher ranks, the gap between male and female academic staff widens.

In literature, it is widely documented that women are generally predisposed to numerous obstacles in accessing educational and employment opportunities that may be socio- cultural, economic and structural challenges such as gender division of labor, allocation of and control of resources and the male dominant patriarchal culture (Kwesiga 2002, Verick, 2014). It is argued that women who have successfully accessed higher education are more empowered and more competitive thus less likely to suffer from these challenges. Other studies, paint a contrasting picture where women with higher education are faced with an unprecedented hard path in their personal and professional development (Schnackenberg, 2019). This is demonstrated by the fewer women pursuing higher professional opportunities for career growth, and being able to cope with work and personal balanced life.

The study explored the expectations, achievements, and experiences of women with doctoral degrees mainly working in Universities in Kenya. The aim was to seek strategies for addressing possible barriers at the systemic level leading to more supportive environments for women with high education, improved access to opportunities and changed society's cultural attitudes towards women.

Research objectives

The broad aim of this study was to explore the experiences and to investigate gender and other diversity issues among women who hold doctoral degrees.

More specifically, the objectives of this research were as follows:

- Explore experiences of women who and hold doctoral degrees how their gender may have influenced their career paths.
- Highlight factors that may have facilitated or hindered their PhD program completion and career progression.
- Explore gender and issues around motherhood, gendered subject areas and other factors that may or may not impact on career progression.

Literature Review

Economic growth of any nation requires the effective participation of all human resources. As women represent one half of the active population (World Bank 2018), they should be fully involved in this process on an equal basis with men. Human rights require that they participate on an equal footing with men in all spheres of the political, economic and social life of their countries, particularly in the decision-making process (UNHR 2017). Despite the marked improvement in the access of females to education (West & Curtis 2006) and the fact that rules guarantee equal rights to education and employment for both sexes, the actual situation of women is different from that of men, and many studies seem to share recognition that women still face numerous problems and challenges and still occupy a secondary and inferior position to that of men (Bell 210; NCES, 2016). This inequality is found in the legal, social and political domains and has various effects on the lives of women of different classes or educational backgrounds, and limits women's access to education and employment, as well as to effective integration in the decision-making process.

 With gender equality being at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, nations should ensure compliance with their international human rights obligations in devising laws and policies that are inclusive. Cultural perceptions of the roles which women are expected to fill are reflected in the extent to which women participate in formal education and the type of education to which they have access (UNESCO 2016). Historically the global picture has been one of discrimination against girls and women in education for all but a favored few (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2015). In planning and decision-making positions, women are virtually unrepresented, often justified by the myth that the reason women are so underrepresented in key positions is that too few women hold the advanced degrees necessary to qualify them for prestigious leadership positions (UNESCO 2016).

Higher Education is associated with the personal, social, economic and cultural aspects of human being, and underpins the goal of a sustainable society (Shaukat & Siddiquah, 2013). It provides opportunities for people to enjoy an enhanced state of the mind (Shaukat and Bell 2015). It helps in the understanding of societal norms; gives individuals self-reliance, and discourages discrimination based on gender, beliefs, religion and social class (Kramarae 2000). The role of academic PhD holders is extremely important as they can potentially produce a large amount of scientific output that will serve as an engine to economic development (Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley 2009). In this paper, PhD refers to an academic or professional degree that, qualifies the degree holder to teach their chosen subject at university level or to work in a specialized position

in their chosen field. PhD holders can, for example, promote innovations in companies, boost the credibility of organizations and connect ideas between academia and industry (Diamond et al. 2014). As Tornroos (2017) notes, PhD gives one the ability to piece together and solve problems and skills related to searching for, adopting and critically examining knowledge.

Notably, educating women is considered most critical to achieving these benefits as well as for improvements in the areas of health, fertility and nutrition (World Bank, 2004). For qualified women, higher education permits them to become role models for younger girls (Usha & Sharma, 2001). It also enables women to have a greater sense of control over their lives and resources within the family as compared to uneducated women (Usha &Sharma, 2001). This empowers them and gives them autonomy which they can enjoy both at community or national level

Women are however underrepresented in higher learning institutions in Africa, both as students and employees, (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley 2009, Mama, 2003. Inequalities in higher education participation are occasioned by differences in terms of time (and age), place, gender, ethnicity, first language, parental (and sibling) social class, parental education, type of school attended, family structure and religious background (Gorard, et al., 2006).

A number of theories have been used to explain women's under-representation in leadership roles. One of the most common is that of the 'glass ceiling', which has been defined as 'a barrier so subtle that it is transparent, yet so strong that it prevents women and minorities from moving up in the management hierarchy' (Morrison and von Glinow, 1990: 200). Eagly and Carli (2007) however argue that to use this metaphor to conceptualize women's under-representation in leadership roles can be misleading because this concept conveys the idea of a single, unvarying obstacle. It not only fails to capture the complexity of the barriers encountered by women in their careers and the effect on their progression within an organization, but also encourages the adoption of interventions that do not sufficiently address the problem. They instead use a metaphor of 'labyrinth' where professional women find themselves having to negotiate several 'twists and turns' along the way in their career. These include but not limited to family responsibilities, stereotypical views of women and issues around their perceived leadership styles. Eagly and Carli therefore note that if we can understand the various barriers that make up this labyrinth, and how some women find their way around them, we can work more effectively to improve the situation.

Another metaphor adopted to describe gender bias faced by women once they have achieved leadership roles is that of the 'glasscliff' (Ryan and Haslam 2007). This describes the fact that women are more likely to be appointed on company boards that are under-performing and to be the subject of greater scrutiny and criticism compared with their male counterparts, making their standing as senior leaders correspondingly more fragile. To bridge the leadership divide, there is need to fight the unconscious biases and provide women with the resources and pathways they need to make the most of their talents. Companies need to change the way they recruit, retain and empower their employees.

Conceptual Framework

This study was guided by the empowerment approach. Developed in the mid-1980s, the empowerment approach is a relatively new approach in women and development discourse. According to this theory, existing structures in the societies are sources of women's subordination, hence the need to challenge them at all levels. The structures of inequity start within the family, and reach all levels of socio-economic, political, and cultural structures of our societies. The empowerment approach views the issue of women's gender subordination within this complex socio-political, economic, and cultural context. Since the causes of women's inferior status and unequal gender relations are deeply rooted in history, religion, culture, in the psychology of the self, in laws and legal systems, and in political institutions and social attitudes, if the status and material conditions of women's lives is to change at all, the solutions must penetrate just as deeply (Schuler and Kadirgamar-Rajasingham, 1992 quoted in Batliwala, 1994: 130). Women's gender subordination is deeply rooted not only in the existing structures, but also in the minds of both women and men. The structures of inequity function in a spiral way in that they feedback themselves. They not only produce women's gender subordination, but also strengthen and protect it through socio-cultural norms. The result is the so-called 'false consciousness' which makes both women and men believe that women's inferior position is normal and natural.

Gender-based subordination is deeply ingrained in the consciousness of both men and women and is usually viewed as a natural upshot of the biological differences between the two genders. It is reinforced through religious beliefs, cultural practices, and educational systems (both traditional and modern) that assigns women lesser status and power (DAWN, 1988: 26). The empowerment approach views the issue of gender subordination not only from the gender perspective. According to the empowerment approach, women's experiences in socio-economic, political, and cultural structures are determined also by other factors such as class, nation, ethnicity, and race: The empowerment approach is therefore a strategy which aims at helping women to gain the power they need for breaking the relations of dependence.

PhD holders may experience changing value perceptions affected by social and cultural factors, in addition to the economic reward associated with the qualification (Kalafatis & Ledden, 2013). Despite much publicity on the subject, very little research explores the contextual factors of personal, social, and cultural value that individuals experience from the doctorate. Ledden, Kalafatis, and Samouel (2007) note that the structures, contexts, and relationships within which individuals operate influences their perception on the value of education. This study explored these aspects directly, and therefore, seeks to fill such gaps in understanding the status of women who have beaten all odds to attain doctoral degrees, in addition to identifying obstacles and seeking possible intervention strategies.

Method

The study used a mixed approach to data collection. This happened in two phases: Phase 1, questionnaire deployment and Phase 2, focus group discussions. During Phase 1, both men and women who held doctoral degrees (PhD) and working in institutions of higher learning (n=103) responded to a questionnaire about their academic and professional qualifications; marital status; higher education institution for which they studied; as well as about their opinions and feelings concerning factors which either enabled or constrain their careers. The questionnaire also sought information about the influence of their current responsibilities on their family lives and vice versa; acceptance by their families of their jobs; their participation in the decision-making process of the institutions; their experience in dealing with superiors and subordinates of each sex; their feelings about any discrimination between males and females occupying similar positions, etc. In Phase 2, 30 women participated in 5 focus group discussions to prop further issues captured by the questionnaires which covered gendered issues related but not limited to career growth, work experience, journey to PhD, marriage and family social and economic empowerment. The study involved women PhD holders working in universities in Kenya. The participants were identified using a snowball technique (Patton 2002) enlisting the support of the Athena Swan network from each of the academic institutions. The discussions sought their opinions about the opportunities for women in higher education management; obstacles which hinder their appointment in such posts; strategies and procedures which would enable women to participate better in their career. Although the sample size is relatively small and does not allow for the findings to be generalized, the data does provide rich insights into the experiences of women PhD holders working in higher learning institutions.

Demographics and Analysis

A total of 103 respondents answered the questionnaires. 63 (61.2%) of these were male and 40 (38.8%) were female. Majority 55 (53.4%) of these respondents were aged between 40-49 years, followed by 32(31.1%) between age range 40-49 years, 15(14.6%) between 30-39 years and only 1 below 30 years. Out of the 63 male respondents, only 1 was below 30 years, 11 were aged between 30-39 years, 35 between 40-49 years and 16 above 50 years. For females, 4 were aged between 30-39 years, 20 between 40-49 years and 16 above 50 years. There were no female respondents aged below 30 years.

Majority (81%) of the respondents already had families when they were undertaking their doctoral studies. Only 13.6 % (14) had not started families. 1.9% (2) had separated by the time they were pursuing their PhD and 1.9% (2) were widowed. One respondent chose not to reveal her status.

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Table 1: Marital status when pursuing PhD

Marital Status	Number of Participants (n=103)	Percentages
Married	84	81.60%
Never married	14	13.60%
Separated	2	1.90%
Widow	2	1.90%
Prefer not to say	1	1%

Age of acquiring doctoral degree

The largest number 53 (51.5%) of respondents acquired their PhD at the age of 30-39. 35 (34%) did it at 40-49, and 12(11.7%) at over 50 years. Only 3 (2.9%) got their PhD at the age below 30. Of those who acquired their degree at the age above 50 years, only one was male as the rest 11(91.7%) were female. No female respondent acquired PhD at the age below 30 compared to male respondents who had 3. Majority (20) of female respondents acquired their PhD at the age of 30-39 years. The same trend it observed with male respondents where 33 out of 60 respondents received their PhD at 30-39 years.

Table 2: Age of acquiring PhD

	Male		Female	
Range of Ages	Percentages	Number of Participants	Percentages	Number of Participants
<30	4.80%	3	0.00%	0
30-39	52.40%	33	50.00%	20
40-49	41.30%	26	22.50%	9
> 50 years	1.60%	1	27.50%	11

Gender and type of institution studied

Out of the 103 respondents, 47(45.6%) acquired their PhD from public universities in Kenya, 11(10.7%) from private universities in Kenya, 38 (36.9 %) from public universities abroad and 4 (3.9%) from private universities abroad. 25(39.7%) out of the 63 male respondents received their doctorate from public universities in Kenya compared to 22(55.2%) female respondents. 5 (7.9%) of male respondents acquired their PhD from private universities in Kenya, compared with 6(15%) female respondents. Majority 29(46%) of male respondents received their doctorate from public universities abroad compared to 9(22.5) female respondents. Only 3(4.8%) male respondents and 1(2.5%) female did their PhD studies in private universities abroad.

Table 3: Type of institution attended

Gender	Male		Female	
	Percentages	Number of Participants	Percentages	er of Participants
Public University Kenya	39.70%	25	55.00%	22
Private University Kenya	7.90%	5	15.00%	6
Public University abraoad	46.00%	29	22.50%	9
Private university abroad	4.80%	3	2.50%	1
Other	1.60%	1	5.00%	2

Gender and employment activities

A doctoral degree gives qualifications to work as a researcher or as an expert in demanding research and development tasks. Possible employers of doctoral degree holders therefore are not limited to those relevant to their doctoral dissertation but also extend to those that could benefit the wider spectrum of skills. The largest employer for doctoral degree holders is the universities and this study found that majority of the respondents were mainly involved in teaching. Out of the 103 respondents, 75(72.8%) were involved in teaching, 15(20.6%) in administration and only 2(1.9%) purely in research and 11 (10.7%) indicated that they were involved in more than one of the work activities listed (marked as "other" in the questionnaire). Of the 63 male respondents, 45(71.4%) were involved in teaching, 13(20.6%) in administration, and none in pure research. 2(5.0%) in research and 6 (15%) indicated that they were involved in teaching and administration. Out of the 40 female respondents, 30 (75%) were involved in teaching, 2(5%) in administration, 2(1.9%) purely in research and 11 (10.7%) indicated that they were involved in more than one of the work activities listed.

Table 4: Primary employment activity

	Male		Female	
	No. of ppartcipants	Percentage	No. of partcipants	Percentage
Teaching	45	71%	30	75%
Administration	13	21%	2	5%
Research	0	0%	2	5%
Other	5	8%	6	15%

Relevance of work to doctoral studies

A total majority of 101(98%) of the respondents indicated that the work they were doing was very relevant or relevant to their doctoral degree. 74(71.8%) of the respondents indicated that the work they were doing was very relevant to the doctoral qualification, 27(26.2%) said it was relevant. Only 2 (1.9%) indicated that the work they did was completely irrelevant. 52(82%) of the 63 male respondents rated their work as *very relevant* compared to 22(55%) of the 40 female. No female

felt that the work she did was completely irrelevant compared to 2 male respondents who expressed that they were doing completely irrelevant work.

Table 5: Relevance of work

	Male		Female	
	No. of partcipants	Percentage	No. of participants	Percentage
Very relevant	52	82.50%	22	55.00%
Relevant	9	14.30%	18	45%
completely irrelevant	2	3.20%	0	0%

Program funding

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they received funding for their doctorate or whether they funded their doctorate themselves. 27 out of 63 (42.25%) of the male respondents were fully funded for their PhD studies and 8 (12.7%) were partially funded, compared to 11 out of the 40 (27%) female respondents who were fully funded and 5 (12.5%) partially funded. Only 44% of male respondents privately funded their doctorate compared to 60% of their female counterparts. The responses are presented in the table below.

Table 6: Primary funding

	Male		Female	
	No. of partcipants	Percentage	No. of participants	Percentage
Fully sponsored	27	42.90%	11	27.70%
Partially sponsored	8	12.70%	5	12.50%
Privately sponsored	28	44.40%	24	60.00%

Duration of the program

Of the 103 respondents, 35(34 %) completed their doctoral studies in less than 4 years, 30 (229.1%) within 4 years, 20(19.4%) within 5 years and 18 (17.5%) in more than 6 years. Of the 63 male respondents, 23 (36.5%) completed their studies in less than 4 years compared to 12(30%) of their female counterparts. Most female 37% completed their studies within 4 years compared to 23.8% of the male respondents. For the respondents whose PhD studies lasted more than 6 years, 15.9% were male and 20% female.

Table 7: Duration of PhD Program

	Male		Female	
	No. of partcipants	Percentage	No. of participants	Percentage
3 years	5	7.90%	5	12.50%
3.5 Years	18	28.60%	7	17.50%
4 Years	15	23.80%	15	37.50%
5 Years	15	23.80%	5	12.50%
>6 Years	10	15.90%	8	20.00%

Reasons for undertaking a Doctorate degree

Respondents were asked to indicate the main reasons they decided to do a doctorate. They were given a list of possible reasons but could specify another reason if they wished. The reasons chosen are shown in the table below. Overall majority (95.2%) of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the main reason they undertook a doctorate was, "*Because I love my subject and wanted to learn more*." The second most common main reason was, "*I have an aptitude for my specialty,*" which (94.8%) out of 85 respondents agreed or strongly agreed. This was followed by A *doctorate is a pre-requisite for the career I wanted*," which 85.8% of 85 respondents strongly agreed or agreed with. 79.4% of 78 respondents who answered the question strongly agreed or agreed that they did PhD "To *improve my employability*". 67.5% did PhD *"To enhance my earning potential'; 59.4%* were *"inspired/encouraged by a tutor/staff member.* 51.3% were *'inspired/encouraged by a family member/friend'*. No other reasons were selected by more than 30%% of respondents overall.

Table 8: Reasons for undertaking a doctoral degree

	No. of participants	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree
Because I love my subject and wanted to learn more	85	68.20%	27%	4.70%	0%
I have an aptitude for my specialty	78	61.50%	33.30%	3.80%	0%
A doctorate was a pre-requisite for the career I wanted	85	56.40%	29.40%	5.90%	2.30%
I "wandered" into a doctorate after my Master's degree	69	10.10%	20.20%	11.60%	21.70%
To improve my employability	78	41%	38.40%	11.50%	5.1%)
I was inspired/encouraged by a tutor/staff member	79	20.20%	39.20%	21.50%	12.70%
To enhance my earning potential	74	36.40%	31.10%	16.20%	13.50%
I was inspired/encouraged by a family member/friend	74	18.90%	32.40%	21.60%	16.20%
I realized that others I knew were applying for doctorates	67	1.50%	28.00%	16.40%	17.90%
Don't know why	50	2%	6%	14%)	10%
Other					

 Post-doctoral experience

The participants were asked to describe their experience after their PhD completion. The percentages of male and female respondents who strongly agreed or agreed to the given statements were analyed separately. 61 out of 63 men and 39 0ut of 40 women responded to the question. Out of these repondents, 85% of men and 66.7% of the women agreed that *Since they received their doctorate, their relationship with family had improved*. 90.9% male and 73.9% female agreed to the statement that *Since I received my PhD my relationship with the community has improved*. 84.4% male and 83.9% female agreed to the statement that *Since I received my PhD my/our financial status has greatly improved*. 91.1% male and 87.5% female agreed to the statement that *Since I received my PhD, I command more respect in my community than before*. 80.5% male and 63% female agreed to the statement that *Since I received my PhD, I have gained access to opportunities and I feel I have realized my dream*. 84.8% male and 83.3% female agreed to the statement that *Since I received my PhD, the expectations of my family have changed and I feel under pressure economically*. 19.9% male and 25% female agreed to the statement that *Overall, my experiences as a PhD holder are what I expected*. 17.1% male and 32% female agreed to the statement that *Since I received my PhD, my relationship with family has deteriorated as*. 12.3% male and 34.6% female agreed to the statement that *Since I received my doctorate, I have felt socially isolated*.

Table 9: Post-doctoral experience per gender

Since I received my PhD...	%Male (n=61)	%Female (n=39)
my relationship with family has improved]	85%	66.70%
my relationship with the community has improved]	90.90%	73.90%
my/our financial status has greatly improved	84.40%	83.90%
I command more respect in my family and community than before	91.10%	87.50%
I have gained access to opportunities and I feel I have realized my dream	80.50%	63%
my family's expectations have changed and I feel under pressure economically	84.80%	83.30%
Overall, my experiences as a PhD holder are what I expected	19.90%	25%
my relationship with family has deteriorated	17.10%	32%

Focus group discussions

Ordinarily, a PhD is an advanced and respected research qualification. Those who pursue doctoral studies have high expectations with regard to the skills they would gain during a PhD and the wide range of careers open to them upon completion. Findings of this study indicate that many women participants pursued a PhD with varied life expectations. These expectations have been categorized into the following core themes: (1) career expectations; (2) skills expectations; (3) societal expectations; (4) personal expectations. These themes were consistent across the sample,

although the way each participant judged expectations was influenced by contextual and situational factors. Interpretations in relation to the core themes are discussed below.

Career growth expectations

One factor attributed to the participants engaging in doctoral studies was the recognition that they hoped to gain in their career once they graduated. To most of them, a doctoral degree was a symbol of intellect. They felt that the doctorate degree would open up prospects for climbing the job ladder. Superficially, PhD meant access to exclusive and highly regarded career opportunities, knowledge, greater income, respect and access to additional resources. Participants expected that they would gain opportunities and be able to make significant contributions in their communities. For those on scholarships, this was one of the requirements from their sponsors.

There was however no consensus on whether their doctorates had already afforded them higher rates of promotion, but some articulated how they could access job opportunities that were not open to them before, allowing them to progress in their careers. To some of the participants, attaining PhD was a requirement in order to keep their jobs at university. The doctorate was seen as an important factor in gaining employment, and would contribute positively towards success in employment. The participants however reported that the promotion system at their institutions was too challenging and biased. Although university hiring and promotion should be based on merit with pre-established universal Kenya's Commission of University education (CUE) criteria, the women felt that institutional policies and cultures worked against their growth. Few women were making it up the academic ladder. Asked whether they expected to reach the rank of (full) professor before retirement as per their dreams, most women participants noted that this was not likely, giving reasons such as systemic bias, lack of motivation; insufficient time to publish, or no desire for additional responsibilities.

Skills expectations

The other factor for pursuing a PhD concerned the demand to be an expert in their field of interest. This would be realized in their responsibility as lecturers, supervisors and researchers. They noted that they were passionate about their subject, and wanted to use their research time to make important discoveries within that field through research. Obviously a PhD does not only demonstrate an individual's ability to conduct independent research, but also showcases their in-depth knowledge in a specific subject area. Within the world of academia, this is essential. As a requirement by the university and also for advancement in their career, the expectation to publish in journals was of utmost importance to the participants.

Societal expectations

In the traditional African society, men must be better than women. This concept is not different in academic achievement. The society expects women to fulfill their traditional role as housewives, care givers as opposed to engaging in intellectual activities. When a woman is more learned or

professionally successful, men in the African culture tend to feel more threatened because they feel there are no other ways to be a "successful" man. As confirmed by some participants, this was a common practice within their context. One participant described this as more of an emotional insecurity than anything. She called it 'fear of unknown'.

African masculinity is primarily still built around accomplishments in the workplace where high pay and power is emphasized. African relationship expectations are still highly influenced by patriarchal traditions. As found from the quantitative analysis, unlike men, women cannot delay marriage for education because of the pressure to marry young. Those who opt to complete their PhD before marriage find it difficult to find marriage partners. As one participant notes: *'men don't seem too keen on women holding professional or other higher degrees; they are too scared of us'*. Looking at this closely, however, the issue here could be more related to age than education. Naturally, if you have a PhD, you've been in school for quite a while and are thus significantly advanced in age and potential partners would be married by the time you are done with studies.

Personal expectations

PhD shapes an individual's sense of identity. Individuals' previous learning experiences affect their present and future 'identity-trajectories', influencing sense-of-self within the doctorate, and beyond (McAlpine and Amundsen 2011). Participants described their doctoral qualification as a hard-earned treasure whose value would be seen in the benefits. This is similar to the views of Kalafatis and Ledden (2013, p. 1544) who described educational value as interwoven 'benefits and sacrifices' with benefits arising from within experiences of 'monetary and psychological sacrifices'. Having invested a large portion of their time in academics at the expense of family, it is expected that completion would yield rewards. These rewards according to the participants would range from spending more time with family, a well-paying job, to improved living standards. Findings from this study however paint varied experiences at individual level some of which conflict their initial expectations. The unmet expectations are a major source of dissatisfaction and disappointment. Individuals would take it that their PhD was not worth the time, emotional effort, and financial investment. In the absence of better institutional policies and work environments, it could lead women to settling for the bare minimum for lack of motivation.

Discussion of results

Research question 1: Experiences of women who hold doctoral degrees

It was a strongly held belief across all participants that their doctoral degree had contributed significant personal value to their lives. They felt a strong sense of achievement and had developed resilience amidst adversity, showing that the PhD had contributed positively to the way they perceived their identity. The participants, however, felt that despite their respectable status as PhD holders, many times their gender had worked against their expectations. They observed that the

perception held by society works both positively towards and negatively against them and often times the negative experiences are endured silently. For instance, female professors are perceived by male PhD candidates as displaying masculine characteristics, a factor that affects both work and societal relationships.

Participants reported that traditional views on gender roles in Africa have led many to believe that the husband should have the highest academic achievement in a family. Women with too much knowledge are perceived to be more independent in their thinking, something that often causes misunderstanding within the family. For those women who were single, they felt that their PhD worked against them as men used the status to emotionally blackmail them and passive aggressive behaviors or say hurtful things that were meant to demean and show that they were undesirable in the marriage market. Take the case of Mary (pseudonym) who reported that her colleagues often referred to her as 'girl' something she found quite offensive. According to Mary, women who pursue PhD before marriage do so at a high price. They are far less likely to be married. It is probably this fear for emotional blackmail that pushes women to choose to have children before they can take their doctoral studies as shown from the questionnaires. This choice, however, comes with its fair share of challenges. Unlike men, family responsibilities negatively affect women's, academic progress.

Some of the participants noted that their PhD was a major source of conflicts in their families and they said that they suffered silently as their status did not allow them to openly display it. 'We have to play it cool because of our status (Ann)'. Being in academia means that one should be continuously involved in professional activities such as research, besides other work-related duties. Some women participants reported that they were involved in research and related partnerships, but these did not go well with their spouses and even work colleagues as such engagements had led to accusations of infidelity. Such cases of mistrust impacted negatively on their self-confidence and even motivation to engage in professional development activities.

Research question 2: Factors affecting PhD program completion

The survey indicate that more men received scholarships for their studies and most of the studies happened abroad. Majority of the women did their PhD studies locally with a larger number self-sponsoring their programs. Perhaps a possible reason for the variation is the fact that most women opt to start families before they can pursue their PhDs and most available scholarships would require them to travel abroad; a factor the women in the study reported would scarcely be agreeable with their spouses. Most men would not like to be left behind to take care of the children   nor leave their work to accompany their spouses abroad. However, the women argued that it was quite normal for a woman to leave her job to accompany her spouse who was going for studies abroad. Another factor denying women access to funding is that unlike men who can take up studies when they are still raising young families, the women are usually knocked out by age because by the

time the children are grown (to allow them to go back to study), they are past the age bracket for most available scholarships. The variation in funding sources by gender does suggest that perhaps we ought to monitor the funding sources of the doctoral students by gender to ensure that in particular, females are able to access available university scholarships.

The women participants, as revealed in this study postponed their doctoral studies in order to start families. Findings from this study show that the largest number of respondents acquired their PhD at the age of 30-39. However, compared to men, no female respondent acquired PhD at the age below 30, but there were more women, who acquired their PhD at the age above 50 years. Also, more women took more than 6 years to complete their doctoral studies. The challenge does not seem to end after graduation because they continue to play their societal roles such as caregivers for their spouses, children, and elderly parents. These responsibilities seem to limit their engagement in academic activities, a factor that also appears to negatively impact on their career mobility.

Research question 3: Factors affecting career progression.

Emerging from the study is the notion that higher learning institution policies poorly reward the woman academics with regard to the extra contribution she makes not only to the university she works for but also to the society in general. Although there is evidence of their promotion and tenure policies within institutions, they tend to be both rare and few to benefit the woman academic. Ordinarily, women are more likely to give up their time for more service than scholarly works. For instance, the women participants in this study reported that they are involved in service work which is more fulfilling but not necessarily career-advancing. These may include committee involvement; formal and informal counselling roles; professional service work; and various events related to student life. These tasks do not necessarily lead to the same kind of career advancement opportunities as the more highly valued and rewarded activities like scholarship or leadership initiatives do. This causes them to lag behind in terms of promotions and career growth.

Emerging from the study also was the perception of women being their own enemies. Far from nurturing the growth of younger female talent, fellow women tend to pull down possible competitors by puncturing their self-confidence or undermining their professional standing as reported by part of the participants. A participant reported that it was difficult to find experienced women professors mentoring young women PhD holders for example in research. This sounds ironical as the very women who complain about unequal treatment from men seem to be perpetuating many of the same problems on fellow female colleagues.

Conclusion

This study explored expectations and experiences of women with higher education qualifications (PhD) within the structures of the family, socio-economic, and cultural structures of the society.

The findings reveal that stereotyping and unconscious bias still exist within the society and even in higher learning institutions. The women in the study felt that their gender works against them in terms of social and work experience thus curtailing the realization of their initial PhD expectations. Universities are a part of society, and the academic freedom to pursue knowledge is a vital necessity in any society that is set to move forward. If women are essential in the creation of knowledge-based economic growth then the society needs to recognize their role. This means that achieving fairness should not only be about access to learning, but much more broadly, of challenging the work environments, the attitudes, and the existing societal stereotyped barriers and old paradigms about women. It is undeniable that much progress has been made in the number of women attaining PhDs, but there is need to put more effort in renewing systems and institutions processes so as to strengthen women's role in education and their contribution to social development in general.

Further research and recommendations

There are some key limitations of this study that should be acknowledged and built upon in further research. As this study was exploratory in nature, it did not seek a large sample to collect generalizable data of PhD holder's experiences. Although insights revealed could be relevant across university contexts, we acknowledge that the context in which this study occurred and its results are not globally representative. For example, modes of PhD study, workplace policies, cultures and protocols, across the world vary hence would impact experiences differently. Further detailed exploration is also required in other employment sectors to give a comparative study of the women's experiences.

Even though the main focus of the study was mainly on expectations and experiences faced by women in higher education, solutions to the challenges were also proffered. One of the solutions suggested was collaboration in research. Women can unite and assist each other when conducting research in order for them to bit family conflicts arising from mixed gender collaborations. Experienced women, on the other hand, need to empress the spirit of mentorship so as to promote their own. This can be in the area of research or work in general.

Institutions can review their policies to set up differentiated terms of contracts that recognize individuals whose preferences are on service as opposed to scholarship. This will ensure that the valuable service work that many women undertake within higher education settings is rewarded.

Institutions to offer an increased number of formal mentoring and leadership development opportunities for women. There is also need for community–university partnership that is focused on solutions to gendered issues of, economic, cultural, social perspectives.

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