

The Kind of Support to the Female Leaders' Success in Higher Education: Tales from Vice Chancellors

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Abstract

The number of females in senior leadership positions is increasing in Ugandan universities. Previous research has focussed mainly on the barriers females face in accessing and occupying leadership positions. However, little is known about the kind of support that enables those few females who have broken the *glass ceiling* to succeed in their roles. This article explores the kind of support for the female Vice Chancellors' success in Ugandan universities. Using a multiple case study design and semi-structured interviews, this study highlights institutional policies, support from senior management, networking, mentoring, role models and family support as critical to the success of female Vice Chancellors in universities in Uganda.

Keywords: support, leadership, females, Vice Chancellors, higher education

Introduction

Over the centuries, women have been widely under-represented in senior leadership positions in higher education (Bulick & Frey, 2017; Semela, Bekele & Abraham, 2020; Townsend, 2021). Whereas women constitute most of the population in most countries (Chanana, 2013), there have been few female Vice Chancellors in the developed and developing country contexts (Gandhi & Sen, 2020; Moodly & Toni, 2017; Morley & Crossouard, 2016). Their underrepresentation has been attributed to the barriers that women face in accessing and occupying leadership positions, including socio-cultural beliefs (Abalkhail, 2017; Coleman, 2019), organisational and individual barriers (Aiston & Fo, 2020; Cukier, Adamu, Wall-Andrews & Elmi, 2021; Johnson, 2021).



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Beginning in the 1990s, more females started participating and making considerable advances in leadership which enabled them to break the glass ceiling (Read & Kehm, 2016). The number of women in leadership positions such as Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor and Deputy Vice-Chancellor also started to increase in Australia and the United Kingdom (Shepherd, 2017; White & Ozkanli, 2010). A similar trend seems to exist in Sub-Saharan Africa, especially in South Africa (White, Riordan, Ozkanli & Neale, 2010). This increase has been attributed to the affirmative action strategies in place. In the Ugandan context, the Government has implemented the affirmative action strategy, which has seen female enrolment and graduation rates outnumbering their male counterparts (Makerere University, 2020). Universities have also designed gender-related policies that consider equity in accessing leadership positions (Kyambogo University, 2014; Makerere University, 2009).

Nevertheless, women in senior positions remain few, and there is a need to pay attention to the kind of support that enables those few female Vice Chancellors to succeed in their leadership positions. We assume that exploring the support female Vice Chancellors need to succeed in their roles may attract more females and enable those in leadership positions to achieve better. On this basis, our study assesses the tales of the few female Vice Chancellors by exploring the kind of support that enables them to succeed in their leadership positions in universities in Uganda.

Literature Review

According to Ramathuba and Davhana-Maselesele (2015), support is the total level of assistance or services given to a person in need. In this study, support refers to institutional policies, assistance from senior management, networking, mentoring, role models and family. Institutional policies are critical for women's success in leadership in higher education. In some contexts, universities have generous parental leave provisions, maternity leave policies, and flexible work arrangements such as allowing flexible working hours, job sharing and working from home for female Vice Chancellors (Burkinshaw & White, 2017; Mwagiru, 2019; Watton, Stables & Kempster, 2019). Such policies then positively impact the female leaders' productivity levels, resulting in compelling performance in their work (Motaung, Bussin & Joseph, 2017; Saunders & Bassett, 2017; Shepherd, 2017). Conversely, there are no family-friendly policies which female leaders need to improve their work-family balance practices in countries like Vietnam, Nigeria, Ghana and Kenya (Annor, 2014; Muasya, 2016; Nguyen, 2013). Therefore, universities need to address the structural limitations in universities by generating more appropriate organisational structures, such as creating more senior-level job share roles (Burkinshaw & White, 2017; Redmond, Gutke, Galligan, Howard & Newman, 2017). This will then enable more women to attain and succeed in senior leadership.

Support from senior managers also enables women to succeed in leadership positions in higher education. Working with the management team, thinking and sharing were seen as excellent support for women in their everyday work (Elomaa, Eskela-Haapanen, Pakarinen, Halttunen & Lerkkanen, 2021). In the developed world, universities have also created supportive structures and cultures for women occupying leadership positions (Bertrand, 2019; Burkinshaw, Cahill & Ford, 2018; Coleman, 2019). Universities have organised women leadership development programmes that provide females, including Vice Chancellors, with practical skills and climates that promote individual development and organisational growth (Burkinshaw & White, 2017; Gipson, Pfaff, Mendelsohn, Catenacci & Burke, 2017; Knipfer, Shaughnessy, Hentschel & Schmid, 2017). Similarly, short-learning programmes have been prepared in South African and Zimbabwe universities, which help shape females for leadership (Kele & Pietersen, 2015; Mwagiru, 2019; Zvobgo, 2014). Childcare crèches, maternity and annual leave provisions have

been provided in Ghanaian and Kenyan universities (Muasya, 2016). With such support, female leaders can balance their family and work-related tasks resulting in improved work performance.

Networking is viewed as essential for women to succeed in leadership positions in the higher education context. Networks can be formal, informal, women-only, mixed gender, social, at the same or different levels of leadership (Abalkhail & Allan, 2015; Coleman, 2019). Scholars recognise the benefits of female leaders in engaging in such networks within and beyond one's institution in higher education (Jones, Hwang & Bustamante, 2015; McNae & Vali, 2015). The benefits include offering valuable contacts, social capital, professional development, a pool of leadership candidates, and emotional and professional support (Coleman, 2019; Inez & Scott, 2018; Mwangiru, 2019). However, women find it challenging to gain entry into the male-dominated networks, which are driven by 'old-boy' connections, family, clan, school and business relations and yet such networks would enable women to occupy and even succeed in leadership, including senior positions in higher education (Obers, 2014). Networking is vital for supporting and enhancing female senior leaders' success in higher education.

Mentoring also enables women to succeed in leadership positions in higher education. Mentoring is a relationship in which a more experienced person provides guidance and support to a less experienced person (Johnson, 2016). Mentoring relationships may be established formally through university programmes or informally without any prearranged schedule (Coleman, 2019; Mullen, 2016). Mentoring enables women to receive psycho-social support through role modelling, counselling, encouragement, friendship and empowerment, improve time management and productivity, improve networking skills, nurture higher administrative aspirations as well as improve satisfaction with their profession and work-life balance (Hill & Wheat, 2017; Redmond et al., 2017). Except for Vietnam, mentor support was also an enabler for women to higher education leadership in developed countries (Maheshwari, 2021). Women need to have female mentors because they can be more sensitive to difficulties women face in the workplace due to their shared experiences (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016; Jones et al., 2015). Successful women leaders can therefore serve as 'powerful' mentors to younger women in leadership (Coleman, 2019).

Women also succeed in leadership positions because of the part played by role models. Role models are essential to female leaders in the higher education setting. For instance, role models enhance women's confidence, improve their understanding of leadership capacities and are instrumental in developing a shared and trusted relationship through a personal support mechanism (Asgari, Dasgupta & Stout, 2012; Hoyt & Johnson, 2011; Redmond et al., 2017). However, the situation in Africa appears to be different because women are grossly under-represented in senior leadership positions resulting in a scarcity of female role models in higher education (Johnson, 2016; Moodly & Toni, 2017). The absence of a pool of female role models leads to confusion about how to act or behave as female leaders (Liu, 2014). Women, therefore, need to look up to the available influential senior leaders, regardless of their gender, for support, as this will help them progress and develop in leadership (Coleman, 2019).

Family support has also been found to contribute to the success of women in leadership positions in higher education. In Vietnam, women leaders have overcome some of their leadership challenges because of the support they receive from their families (Maheshwari, 2021). Family members such as parents, fathers, brothers, sisters and spouses provide the necessary support which motivates women in leadership (Almansour & Kempner, 2016; Austin, 2016; Motaung et al., 2017). This has also been consistent with findings from the African setting but with additional support from their grandparents, uncles, cousins and the church community who render moral

and financial support (Kabonesa & Kaase-Bwanga, 2014; Mabokela & Mlambo, 2014). Whereas some scholars (e.g Johnson, 2014; Redmond et al., 2017) attribute women's success in leadership to their spousal and parental support, there is still a need for more men to participate in household responsibilities, particularly in childcare, in order to enable women to produce quality work that is equal to their male counterparts in Africa (Muberekwa & Nkomo, 2016).

Much as researchers have recognised the support extended to female leaders, there remains a gap in a higher education context where women remain very few and so under-represented in the high echelons of leadership. On this basis, we explore the kind of support the female Vice Chancellors' success in Ugandan universities by accessing their voices and lived experiences on this phenomenon.

Methodology

Our study was guided by the following research question: *What is the kind of support that enables female Vice Chancellors to succeed in leadership in universities in Uganda?* We employed an interpretive approach, specifically the multiple case study design, which enabled us to get deeper information about the lived experiences of women leaders in Ugandan universities (Waite, 2014). The design also supports data analysis within and across settings, understanding unique and critical cases and getting an in-depth understanding of the issue under investigation (Yin, 2014). The participants' demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Bio-data of Female Vice Chancellors in Uganda

Category of University	Participant	Leadership Position	Level of Education	Academic Rank	Area of Specialisation
Public University (PU)	PUVC1	Vice Chancellor	PhD	Professor	Management, gender and higher education
Public University (PU)	PUVC2	Vice Chancellor	PhD	Professor	Zoology
Private Religious-Affiliated University (PRU)	PRUVC1	Vice Chancellor	PhD	Professor	Medical ethnopedagogy and ethnomedicine
Private-for-Profit University (PPU)	PPUVC1	Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Finance and Administration)	PhD	Senior Lecturer	Higher education (adult and community education)

Source: Field data.

Participants were purposively selected within each stratum, which enabled us to get relevant and reliable information (Tipton, 2013). Participants were chosen because of their leadership experience and were occupying senior leadership positions in Ugandan universities. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with female Vice Chancellors because such interviews allowed us to clarify questions, probe, and get first-hand information from our participants (McGrath, Palmgren & Liljedahl, 2018). All interviews lasted approximately an hour and were recorded with the participant's consent. After collecting the data, we followed the four stages of qualitative research data analysis: data preparation, identification, data manipulation and analysis. The data preparation stage involved organising all the data from interviews. The data

were processed and kept in proper files holding the date, place of collection, nature of interaction and follow updates which enabled us to handle our data better. At the data identification stage, data from different participants were identified by an index which enabled us to make changes and improve the data. Codes were also used to label and group data segments by category. For instance, we used the initials PU, PRU and PPU for categories of universities and PUVC1, PUVC2, PRUVC1 and PPUVC1 for the participants, as shown in Table 1. Codification of data helped in easy access and identification during reference and analysis. The data manipulation stage entailed developing categories by looking for similar ideas from single stories of senior female leaders. In the data analysis stage, we pulled data strings together to form sub-themes which were further merged into bigger umbrellas based on their embedded similarities. We then interpreted the data findings through these umbrella themes representing the whole data.

Results

Our findings suggest that institutional policies, support from senior management, networking, mentoring, role models and family support were critical to female Vice Chancellors' success in Uganda's universities.

Institutional Policies

The study participants noted that the policies within their universities have helped them to perform their duties excellently. All the female Vice Chancellors emphasised that academic, finance and Workforce-related policies were critical when executing their leadership roles. For instance, participant PUVC2 serving in a public university, stated, "There are academic-related guidelines in this institution. They guide me on how to deal with admissions of students, teaching and learning, how assessments to do and how to do the whole process of academic management". Relatedly, participant PPUVC1, who works in a private-for-profit university, shared the importance of the fiscal policy in her work. She argued, "I deal with finances and have to make financial decisions daily. I have to understand how to manage the resources, including requisitions, so I go back to the finance manual to guide me in my work." In addition, PRUVC1 and PPUVC1, who worked in private universities, attributed their success to the university Charter. Particularly, participant PPUVC1 reflected, "I serve in a private university. We have the university Charter, a beneficial document I refer to in this office. The Charter gives me the mandate and powers to execute my daily duties". In sum, the female Vice Chancellors acknowledged that the policies within their universities had enabled them to manage the affairs related to academics, finance and Workforce. This, in turn, has helped them to execute their leadership roles effectively in Ugandan universities

Support from Senior Management

All participants conceded the support they received from officers in positions and the governing council as a success factor in leadership positions. In agreement, a participant acknowledged the role of the university council towards her work. PPUVC1 opined that "I am answerable to the council, and so it tells me what to do. In case I am doing it wrongly, it will interrogate the things I have done. Council facilitates me in terms of ideas". These leaders added that the top university management officers greatly supported them in their service. Participant PUVC1 serving in a public university shared that "I have a supportive governing council. Some of the decisions in this university are recommendations of the council. The council makes the overall decisions in this institution which facilitates me to perform my leadership responsibilities effectively". In a similar tone, another participant, PUVC2, added:

Under their job specifications, the different top officers support me. They

implement the decisions made by the council and bring in contributions from their departments. For instance, the University Secretary, and the accounting officer, handle financial matters and gives accountability, while the Academic Registrar handles aspects of academic matters.

A dominant view from the above participants is that the female Vice Chancellors attribute their success in leadership to the technical and collegial support they receive from senior management in their universities. Such support has enabled them to make wise decisions when executing their daily duties.

Networking

The senior female leaders also felt that having national, regional and international collaborations provides excellent opportunities to network with other professionals in their fields. Through networking, they acquire new skills, become more exposed, tend to think through their challenges and successes and get what they do not have. Such learning builds synergies resulting in improved performance in teaching, research and community engagement in Ugandan universities. For instance, PUV2 working with a public university spoke about the importance of networking with national and regional universities:

We have had research collaborations and student and staff exchanges with several academic institutions and community-based entities. We have benefited from research and staff capacity building. As a young university, we need young scientists in research, which adds to our pool of publications, which is a good thing for us.

Relatedly, PPUVC1 working with a private university, intimated that “Collaborations add value to my institution. For instance, public universities have laboratories and some equipment we have not yet bought. So, we send our students there to get exposed and benefit as a private university”. All in all, the female Vice Chancellors attributed their success in leadership to their national, regional and international networks, which equipped them with new skills essential while executing leadership roles in higher education.

Mentors

There was a unanimous consensus from the participants that having a mentor is critical for women to succeed in universities in Uganda. The senior leaders agree that their mentors offer advice, guidance, and encouragement and learn a lot from them, enabling them to perform their leadership responsibilities. In this regard, PRUVC1 pointed out that:

Women of substance mentored me, and they have continuously mentored me. For instance, one of them shared with me at masters that she had had all her children when she was both a mother and an academician. When she shared, that was enough. This encouraged me, and I knew I could also achieve.

Similarly, a participant PPUVC1 serving in a private-for-profit university reported that:

My former heads of departments were my main mentors. From the time I was a student, they mentored me for a particular role and ensured I got there. They focused on me and supported me whenever I fell off the ladder.

In brief, mentors continuously advised the senior female leaders, enabling them to make

intelligent decisions leading to their success in leadership.

Role Models

The senior female leaders attributed their success to their academic, workplace and field role models. The participants strongly felt that they had gotten much inspiration from their role models and learnt much from them. In fact, participant PUVC2 working with a public university, opined:

Professor is my source of inspiration. She is a person of first. She was the first female graduate of medicine in her country, the first female Vice Chancellor of her institution and an internationally recognised researcher. She did her roles very well and finished her two terms without blemish. She left a legacy as an administrator and an academician.

Relatedly, participant PRUVC1 added that:

I adore women that have accomplished. For instance, I initially did not have a work plan, and my hero told me to plan where I would want to be in ten years. So, I developed a plan and having a vision for my life has permitted me to always aim higher in leadership.

In short, the senior female leaders were inspired by their role models, which made them work very hard and helped them succeed in their leadership roles.

Family Support

The female Vice Chancellors also succeeded in leadership positions because of family support. All participants acknowledged support from their families, including spouses, children, parents and siblings. These family members provided academic, physical, moral and financial assistance, which enabled them to execute their duties effectively. This suited participant PUVC1's argument that:

I receive much support from my spouse and children. They pass on anything useful to this university, like a call for papers, proposals and scholarships. They give a lot of advice and free help. For instance, when we were renovating the buildings, my daughter, an architect, volunteered to provide free service.

Relatedly, PRUVC1 acknowledged her spouse's contribution towards her work. She stated that:

My husband is always there for me. He encouraged me to go for my master's and PhD. He has never gotten tired of advising me. He understands the environment in which I work. I am very busy, but he loves me the way I am.

In a nutshell, family members extend academic, physical, moral and financial support to female Vice Chancellors, which has helped them successfully perform their leadership responsibilities in Ugandan universities.

Discussion

Whereas all the female Vice Chancellors in this study attributed their success in leadership to Workforce, finance and academic-related policies, those in private universities also emphasised the university charter. There was consensus that the human resource manual helped them deal with their staff on issues such as absenteeism, multiple employment and resignation, contract termination, study, maternity and sick leave. The financial policies helped them to manage finances. In contrast, academic-related policies were essential when solving issues such as admissions of students, teaching and learning, assessment and the whole process of academic management. These Vice Chancellors emphasised those policies perhaps because they were the top decision-makers and obliged to perform those roles by virtue of their leadership positions. The availability of generous parental leave provisions paid maternity leave policy, and flexible work arrangements for women in senior leadership positions has also been evident in some university contexts (Burkinshaw & White, 2017; Mwangi, 2019; Watton, Stables & Kempster, 2019). Such provisions improve their productivity, enabling them to perform better in their leadership roles (Motaung, Bussin & Joseph, 2017; Saunders & Bassett, 2017; Shepherd, 2017). In other contexts, the absence of family-friendly policies for female leaders has instead constrained the execution of their duties (Annor, 2014; Muasya, 2016; Nguyen, 2013).

Senior management extends support to women at all levels of the organisation, including Vice Chancellors, to transform them into more effective leaders (Bertrand, 2019; Burkinshaw et al., 2018; Coleman, 2019). This resonates with the female Vice Chancellors who attributed their success to the technical and collegial support they received from the university council and the university officers. These officers implement the decisions made by the council and bring contributions from their respective administrative units. In the Ugandan context, where we have very few female Vice Chancellors, support is mainly obtained from the technical and administrative personnel responsible for certain key functions, such as the University Secretary and the Academic Registrar, who handle the financial and academic matters, respectively. These Vice Chancellors bank on the support from the administrative personnel, perhaps because they are the 'first' to occupy such positions. In the developed world, senior managers have supported female leaders by organising training programmes that have led to more female Vice Chancellors in those countries. Particularly, women leadership development programmes have been organised, which equip female leaders, including Vice Chancellors, with practical skills (Burkinshaw & White, 2017; Gipson et al., 2017; Knipfer et al., 2017). In Sub-Saharan Africa, senior managers in universities have organised short training programmes that help shape females for leadership (Kele & Pietersen, 2015; Mwangi, 2019; Zvobgo, 2014). With such support, female leaders can make wise decisions resulting in improved work performance.

Networking at national, regional, and international levels provides avenues for collaborations through which senior female leaders strengthen their leadership capacities. For instance, networking offers valuable contacts, social capital, professional development, and emotional and professional support to female leaders (Coleman, 2019; Inez & Scott, 2018; Mwangi, 2019). According to the study findings, networking was viewed as sharing academic and physical resources, having young scientists trained in high-level research, staff exchanges, joint supervision, and publications with other universities locally and internationally. Conversely, senior leaders in developed countries speak about the importance of female leaders networking with other women in senior leadership positions (Jones et al., 2015; McNae & Vali, 2015). Critical as it may be, the participants in this study did not highlight the existence and value of networks with other female senior leaders in universities, possibly because they have not yet developed large networks since they are the first females to occupy such positions in Ugandan universities.

According to senior female leaders, mentors are critical for their success in leadership in Ugandan

universities. The first female Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor in Uganda reported that she did not get an opportunity to be mentored for leadership when she first occupied the position—lacking female mentors in the Ugandan context to look up to shows how challenging it has been to develop and maintain the identity of a female leader in higher education. However, another fortunate female leader shared that the first female Vice Chancellor and other women mentored her. They are occupying senior leadership positions in universities in Uganda, which has eased her leadership performance. These female leaders have continuously advised, guided, and encouraged her, which enables her to perform her duties effectively. In addition, other women leaders have been mentored by their supervisors during their studies and those they have previously worked with. Several scholars (Hill & Wheat, 2017; Redmond et al., 2017) aver that mentors provide psychosocial support, increase productivity and equip female leaders with relevant skills that enable them to perform their leadership duties effectively. Much as there exist formal and informal mentoring relationships (Coleman, 2019; Mullen, 2016), the participants did not allude to any structured mentorship programmes in Uganda, which indicates a glaring gap. Therefore, with the support of the Ministry of Education and Sports and other agencies, female leaders in higher education must initiate robust and structured mentorship programmes for both serving and prospective female leaders in universities.

Women also succeed in leadership positions because of the part played by role models. Role models are important to female leaders in the higher education setting. For instance, role models enhance women's confidence, improve their self-concepts of leadership capacities, and develop a shared and trusted relationship through a personal support mechanism (Asgari et al., 2012; Hoyt & Johnson, 2011; Redmond et al., 2017). However, the situation in sub-Saharan Africa appears to be different because women are grossly under-represented in senior leadership positions resulting in the scarcity of female role models in higher education (Johnson, 2016, Moodly & Toni, 2017). The absence of a pool of female role models leads to confusion about how to act or behave as female leaders (Liu, 2014). Women, therefore, need to look up to the available influential senior leaders, regardless of their gender, for support, as this will help them progress and develop in leadership (Coleman, 2019).

Many scholars suggest that family members like parents, fathers, brothers, sisters and spouses render support which motivates female leaders when executing their roles (Almansour & Kempner, 2016; Austin, 2016; Motaung et al., 2017). The study participants also emphasised the academic, physical, moral and financial support they receive from their spouses, children, parents, and siblings as crucial to their success in leadership. Additionally, it is evident that in sub-Saharan Africa, grandparents, uncles, cousins, and the church community render moral and financial support, which helps female leaders to balance their work and family responsibilities (Kabonesa & Kaase-Bwanga, 2014; Mabokela & Mlambo, 2014). Perhaps, it is because most Africans live in extended families, so they are ready to support each other. Female Vice Chancellors also receive emotional and instrumental spousal support, maybe because their husbands are aware of the challenges of a seemingly patriarchal society. So they are willing to support their wives to navigate any circumstances to perform well in their leadership position. Family members have attempted to support these female leaders in contexts with very few Vice Chancellors. Muberekwa and Nkomo (2016) argue that males need to participate in house chores as this would give extra time to women leaders to perform their duties more effectively. Scholars emphasise that women who receive spousal and parental support and freely talk to their husbands are more confident performing their leadership roles in higher education (Johnson, 2014; Redmond et al., 2017).

Conclusion

We concluded that support is crucial to the success of these female Vice Chancellors in Ugandan universities. They acknowledged referring to their institutional policies, including those related to academics, finance and Workforce, which helped them to make wise decisions in their work. These female Vice Chancellors relied on the technical and collegial support they received from the university council and the technical and administrative personnel responsible for certain key functions in their universities. They also attributed their success to national, regional and international networks, enabling them to acquire new skills. Local networks of female leaders ought to be initiated and supported by incumbent, past and prospective leaders in universities in Uganda to build the required capacity. Whereas the mentors continued to guide these female leaders, there was the absence of structured mentorship programmes, which ought to be established through collabourative arrangements involving the ministry and other agencies. The shortage of role models who inspired them to work towards better performance in leadership is illuminated, and the strategies to address it have been proffered. For instance, there is a need to profile women in leadership positions through documented biographies, dedicated media programmes, occasional talk shows and dynamic websites, which should be accessible to serving and prospective female leaders as sources of inspiration for better performance. Finally, family support was highlighted as another success factor in leadership for these participants. They mainly depended on academic, physical, moral and financial support from their spouses, children, parents, and siblings. Such support helped these female Vice Chancellors to execute their leadership roles successfully in Ugandan universities.

Limitations and future research

Whereas our findings can be replicated in female Vice Chancellors in similar contexts, we may not generalize them to all female leaders in the different contexts in Ugandan universities because the sample of four female Vice Chancellors is relatively small. Importantly, it has to be understood that the population of female Vice Chancellors in Ugandan universities at the time of the field study was seven. Only four of them were purposively selected based on their leadership experience from each category of university: public, private religious-affiliated and private-for-profit. It would also be fascinating to conduct a related study with women at departmental levels or those who choose to remain in middle leadership positions in higher education and ascertain whether the kind of support available to them as they execute their duties is the same.

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