

## Abstract

Western discourse on the status of women and their positions in society, the inequity in their employment experiences, and their limited participation in leadership dominates intellectual theorizing on African women. This article employs African data to de-marginalize and de-hegemonize African women by explicating how women from Kenya articulate servant-leadership as motherhood in the public domain. Motherhood in Africa is a site of contestation, as it is both a highly regarded status to which women aspire and a site for the marginalization of those women who, either through infertility or otherwise, find themselves unable to be biological parents. In this article, I look at motherhood specifically as it relates to women's leadership in grassroots, national, Pan-African, and global settings, based on qualitative research with sixteen leaders. The article illustrates three ways that motherhood and leadership are connected: motherhood gives the women social status and credibility for leadership in their communities; the responsibility inherent in motherhood generates leadership; and, through their own mothers and grandmothers, the women leaders learn a brand of leadership that is based on service. I will use quotes from interviews with the women leaders to demonstrate these three broad themes. This article illustrates how these women articulate motherhood in the public domain, making use of the positive regard that motherhood bestows upon them socially to gain credibility with their constituents. Those who were not biological mothers illustrate the social stigma associated with childlessness and their struggles to gain credibility as leaders.

## Biography

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## **Servant- Leadership and Motherhood: Kenyan Women Finding Fulfillment in Serving Humanity**

by

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## **Servant-Leadership and Motherhood: Kenyan Women Finding Fulfillment in Serving Humanity**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Women around the world often find themselves on the periphery of organizational leadership, underrepresented in positions of power and authority because of structural, cultural, and social barriers that create a glass ceiling they can barely break (Weiss 1999). Like their sisters around the globe, African women are surrounded by cultural, social, economic, and political barriers to ascending to positions of leadership. In spite of multiple challenges, African women can be found in various leadership roles in both private organizations and public institutions, including the judiciary, parliament, business organizations, schools, colleges, and non-governmental organizations (Mabokela 2003, 2002; Maina and Kabira 1997; Masinjila 1997; Mbugua-Muriithi 1996; Nzomo 1997; Ombati 2003; Tamale 2000). Most of the available literature on African women focuses on explaining their marginalized status and the subsequent deficiencies in access to resources, education, employment, land, property, and human rights (Arndt 2000; Marshall 2001; Muteshi 1998; Ndunda 1995; Oduol and Kabira 1995; Oduyoye 1995; Olusi 1999; Opefeyitimi 1998; Presley 1992). This paper is a counter-narrative, celebrating women's resistance and resilience as demonstrated through their engagement in leadership in the public and community arenas through their active involvement in their own emancipation.

### **Context of Women and Leadership**

Most of the literature on women in leadership is dominated by studies undertaken in North America, dealing with barriers women face in their attempts to reach top management positions, as well as how those who make it into top positions navigate the terrains of gender constraints (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt 2001). Ella Bell and Stella Nkomo (2001) demonstrated the differences between white women and women of color in their experiences in leadership and management. The intersecting oppressions arising from race, class, and gender adversely impact black women's ascent into leadership and management, as well as their experiences in those positions (Bell and Nkomo 2001; Parker 2001; Parker 2005; Parker and ogilvie 1996). As such, black women have various strategies and techniques that they employ in order to survive and thrive in that context (Alston 2005; Jones 2003). Such strategies include embracing spirituality, leveraging their outsider/within positions, engaging in collective action, broadening impact through negotiations, deconstructing existing gender and racial social constructions, and other strategies that will be detailed in this study.

Four studies on women in leadership in Africa focus on their struggles due to race, gender, culture, and contextual realities (Mabokela 2003; Ombati 2003; Tamale 2000; Tripp 2001). Further, African scholars recognize that the women's movement in Africa was initiated and continues to be sustained through women's agency (Ndunda 1995; Nzomo 1997). Women have collectivized in order to come up with solutions to problems that assail them as women, as economically marginalized populations, as mothers, and as Africans in a global economy (Ndunda 1995; Ngunjiri 2007; Tamale 2004; Uraizee 2000). Such women's collectives serving social and economic purposes are led by women, many of whom move from grassroots organizing to national and parliamentary leadership (AAWORD 1998). Women in rural areas

and in urban slums are likely to get involved in leadership through women's groups and collectives—non-elite forums instituted to solve common problems faced in their impoverished communities, such as increasing tuition for their children, and accessing water, proper housing, and engaging in economic activities.

Other studies explore women in leadership in educational institutions in Kenya and South Africa (Chisholm 2001; Phendla 2000), as well as a few that explore the experiences of women leaders in East and Southern Africa (Mabokela 2002; Ombati 2003; Tamale 2000). This paper—and the study from which it was derived—aims to add to the literature on African women and their leadership experiences. The guiding question for the wider study was: *What does it mean to be a woman and a leader in the Kenyan context?* For this particular article, interview data demonstrates how these Kenyan African<sup>1</sup> women articulate servant-leadership, a type of leadership through which they find fulfillment in serving their communities, utilizing skills they claim to have acquired through experience as mothers and observation of other women, their mothers, grandmothers, and *othermothers*.<sup>2</sup> In the next section, I explore servant-leadership and motherhood separately, as the two strands of the theoretical framework for this article that will later be described and combined utilizing interview data.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Servant-leadership**

Robert Greenleaf (1977) conceptualized servant-leadership as a collaborative, non-coercive form of leadership, where the leader engages the system critically in order to institute necessary changes. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate servant-leadership as it is practiced by leaders in a non-Western context, in business, education, government, and the non-profit sector. The notion of servant-leadership runs counter-cultural to traditional Western notions of leadership that are about “great men,” heroes holding positions of power and dominating their subordinates (Greenleaf 1977). For Greenleaf, greatness in leadership should arise out of the desire to serve. A servant leader does not withdraw from engagement with the system but rather critically engages the system in search of social justice (McClellan 2006). That is, servant leaders do not merely criticize corruption, injustice, and other structural problems; rather, a servant leader ponders what can be done about it and engages in action and advocacy. As Greenleaf observed, “criticism has its place, but as a total preoccupation it is sterile” (1977:11). Instead, servant leaders engage in creative encounters with an imperfect world.

For Greenleaf, “the servant leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead” (1977:13). Several researchers in the area of black women's leadership found that these leaders exhibited servant leader characteristics, such as deep spirituality, keen sense of vision and direction, strong sense of efficacy, dedication to community building, collaborative leadership styles, and commitment to their mission or calling (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2002; Jones 2003; Murtadha-Watts 1999; Ngunjiri 2006a, 2006b). Yet servant-leadership may not be appropriate in every culture, as cross-cultural studies of leadership demonstrate that leadership is culture-bound. What is considered good and effective leadership depends on the cultural context, including elements such as power distance, gender egalitarianism, social and institutional communalism (House et

al. 2002; House et al. 2004). This study helps to demonstrate servant-leadership in a particular social, historical, and cultural context, expanding and redefining servant-leadership as enacted by women leaders from Kenya, who happen to be both mothers and leaders.

## **Motherhood**

As in leadership studies, Western discourse on motherhood dominates intellectual discussion and theory building. Within this discourse, issues such as the timing of motherhood, social and cultural narratives about good mothering, and working mothers seem to dominate theory, research, and policy decisions. Issues of work-family conflict and family-friendly policies are also dominant from several disciplinary perspectives, yet such discussions often leave out those mothering from the margins, such as the working class or racial and sexual minorities (Metz 2008).

African American scholars argue that white feminist theory and discourse have focused on the experiences of white middle-class mothers and treated those experiences as generalizable to all American mothers. As Jennifer Metz observed, “African American mothers have always worked, and yet dominant culture of the United States says ‘real’ mothers do not work. We often deny that this myth has penetrated to the very core of our culture” (2008:273). The theme of motherhood and paid wage work is dominant in the US from academic, popular, and government policy perspectives, with no end in sight to the debates (Buzzanell et al. 2007). Motherhood is politicized and political work; it is impacted by class, whereby working-class mothers have no option but to seek paid employment, yet they have limited options for affordable childcare, whereas middle-class mothers can choose to work outside the home or not. Race joins class in further complicating the experiences of non-white mothers, such that women’s narratives converge and diverge from the dominant white middle-class motherhood experiences (Buzzanell et al. 2007; Metz 2008). In addition, discussions of African American motherhood tend to focus on the absence of black fathers, the welfare status of many black mothers, and their struggles with childcare and healthcare, often obliterating the presence of middle-class black mothers. “Black women’s motherhood and work experiences become a careful and difficult negotiation of the mammy/nanny syndrome versus the dangerous mother of the welfare ilk” (Metz 2008:273). In addition, Western feminist discourse oscillates between attacking motherhood as a patriarchal construct that is disempowering to women, versus affirming motherhood as a valuable identity and responsibility that should be protected against male control and masculine values (Walker 1995). What is clear from the discourse on motherhood in the West is that it differs dramatically from the experiences of African mothers and motherhood.

In Africa, children are valued, motherhood revered (Holloos and Larsen 2008). Becoming a parent is part of the traditional conceptions of rites of passage as “a fulfillment of fundamental kinship, religious and political obligations to the community” (Holloos and Larsen 2008:160). Children represent a connection to the ancestors, and their births help in the continuation of the family in a physical and spiritual sense (Mbiti 1969, 1988). In generations past and in some of the more rural and pastoralist communities, children were also necessary for their labor; the economic success of the family was tied to having many.

Traditional African religious beliefs tied women's fertility to the deities, such that a woman's repeated childbearing indicated high moral standing and approval from the deities, ancestors, and other spiritual beings (Hollos and Larsen 2008; Mbiti 1969). In spite of the impact of Western education and missionary Christianity on traditional African cultural norms, such beliefs persist. Infertile women are still perceived as having angered the ancestors or displeased God in some way, thus facing the possibility of ostracism from their community (Hollos and Larsen 2008; Mbiti 1969). In the traditional arrangement, childless women could engage in 'woman-to-woman' marriages in order to get children through the 'wife' (Amadiume 1987; Njambi and O'Brien 2000). The disruptive entrée of missionary Christianity onto the African cultural scene demanded the destruction of such social structures, regarding them as barbaric and backward. Converts were required to do away with such practices, with no replacement practices to mitigate the social stigma attached to childless women. In the absence of such traditional norms, contemporary childless women face difficulties gaining acceptance in their communities.

Reproductive achievement is perhaps more highly regarded socially than monetary achievement and marital status—women will be honored and respected just on the basis of being mothers, whether such children are born in a marriage or to an unmarried woman (Hollos and Larsen 2008; Ngunjiri 2006b). Motherhood is the mark of being fully adult, fully human—to be without child could mean divorce and ostracism in many African societies (Hollos and Larsen 2008). In a survey carried out in Nigeria, respondents generally agreed that a woman who has no child might as well never have been born (Cornwall 2005 quoted in Hollos and Larsen 2008). That is a strong statement indicating the depth of feeling, both personal and communal, connected with perceptions about motherhood.

In South Africa, motherhood is complicated by race and class, in addition to patriarchy that privileges men over women in social settings, employment, political participation, and access to leadership. Cheryl Walker argues that two themes dominate conceptualizations of motherhood in the literature—'collusion with patriarchy' and 'difference' in black and white constructions of motherhood (1995). Walker argues that "the first privileges political discourse over the examination of women's own practice and social identity as mothers, while the second ignores historical evidence for overlapping meanings and common cultural influences among black and white women in the twentieth century" (417). She is convinced that "motherhood cannot be reduced simply to a role imposed on women by men," and patriarchy impacts both white and black women's conceptions of motherhood, not just black South African women alone as proponents of the "difference" discourse argue. The "difference" proponents demonstrated how white South African conceptions of motherhood consisted of a home-centered passive activity, while within the black African National Congress, motherhood was conceptualized as militant and actively involved in the liberation of the country. Black women in South Africa tended to conceptualize motherhood as empowering, even in the face of patriarchy, in part due to the need for women and mothers to protect and fight for their communities under apartheid.

Instead of engaging in this binary construction of black versus white motherhood in South Africa, Walker argues for a more complex understanding of motherhood that would include three terrains: a) mothering work—the practice of motherhood; b) the discourse of motherhood, embracing norms, values, and ideals of 'the good mother' that are present in any society; and c) motherhood as social identity, consisting of the individual's self-image, positively or negatively

valued, which derives from her membership in various social groups. Walker observes that the three terrains should be analyzed and explored in their particular social and historical contexts, taking into account family systems and productive systems that impact their content, power, and meaning. This study demonstrates all three elements in the particular context of Kenya, with reference to cultural norms that arise from the various ethnic groups in the country, as well as the social and political contexts.

### **Motherhood and Leadership**

In the literature on women and motherhood both in Africa and the West, there have been very few studies or discussions connecting motherhood with leadership, particularly in the West where motherhood discourses tend to focus on the pathologies and negativities associated with the struggles of motherhood. Gretchen Bauer's article entitled "The Hand that Stirs the Pot Can Also Run the Country" is the only one I found that related motherhood and leadership in the African context, albeit only to a limited extent. In that article, Bauer explores women's high participation in the Namibian parliament, where in 2004, they represented 20 percent of members of parliament, making Namibia 17<sup>th</sup> in the world at that point. The statement "the hand that stirs the pot can also run the country" was used by women in Namibia to empower themselves as they sought political representation, arguing that they had participated in the freedom movement and therefore also deserved to be involved in running their country (Bauer 2004).

Historically, women in Namibia participated in the freedom struggle at home or in exile. Single women who left on exile were trained as combatants along with the men, while others sought higher education, enrolling in universities and colleges to become lawyers, doctors, and engineers—professions otherwise regarded as male dominated. Those who remained in Namibia participated in the resistance movement, acting as "mothers, daughters and sisters utilizing the potential opportunities given by their traditional roles. They were not aware of, or even interested in feminism or its analysis of their situation, but were still empowered as women" (Soiri 1996:91 as quoted in Bauer 2004:498). They acted as "radical mothers" because their communities were under threat, as true in Namibia as it was in Kenya, South Africa, and other places where independence was won only after armed struggle. Whereas Bauer's article details women's activism and engagement in politics in Namibia, it is not focused on the connections between motherhood and leadership, instead focusing on a diverse set of circumstances and issues that have supported women's political participation in local and national politics. In fact, in ending her article, Bauer comments that "while many Namibian women are still busy stirring the pots, at least some are trying their hand at running the country" (504). This present article explicates women's experiences in stirring the pots and running companies, schools, government, colleges, and community-based organizations. Before I engage in that exploration, I will clarify the biographical approach I utilized in data collection as well as my data analysis procedures, demonstrating my active involvement in the research as the primary research instrument.

## **PORTRAITURE BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH**

In this qualitative study, I used portraiture as my central biographical approach. Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis, who conceptualized the approach as a method of inquiry and documentation in the social sciences, describe portraiture as seeking to:

... combine systematic, empirical description with aesthetic expression, blending art and science, humanistic sensibilities and scientific rigor. The portraits are designed to capture the richness, complexity and dimensionality of the people who are negotiating those experiences. The portraits are shaped through dialogue between the portraitist and the subject, each participating in the drawing of the image. The encounter between the two is rich with meaning and resonance and is crucial to the success and authenticity of the rendered piece (1997:3).

Portraiture as a biographical data collection method is ideal for this study, especially due to its concentration on a search for goodness. I aimed at drawing out the stories that capture the origins and expression of that which is working in spite of, rather than in the absence of challenges and barriers (Jones 2003). With portraiture I moved away from pathologizing African women's experiences (Jones 2003), instead pointing toward discovering stories of resilience in the face of challenges. Portraiture aims at enabling the researcher and participants to co-create narratives. That was important for the purposes of this study as far as providing authentic portraits that are true to the women and that adequately reflect the essence of their leadership experiences within an African context. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) attested to the defining elements of portraiture thus:

In summary, portraiture is a method framed by the traditions and values of the phenomenological paradigm, sharing many of the techniques, standards, and goals of ethnography. But it pushes against the constraints of those traditions and practices in its explicit effort to combine empirical and aesthetic description, in its focus on the convergence of narrative and analysis, in its goal of speaking to broader audiences beyond the academy (thus linking public discourse and social transformation), in its standards of authenticity rather than reliability and validity... and in its explicit use of the self as the primary research instrument for documenting and interpreting the perspectives and experiences of the people and culture being studied (13–14).

As noted above, portraiture is rooted in phenomenology, accounting for how people think about and interpret their own experiences (Lynn 2001). This is an important element in studying leadership as experienced by African women because the participants had the opportunity to be actively involved in co-creating their stories and confirming some of my early interpretations of their life stories. It is also useful in understanding the women's experiences with motherhood, a topic that emerged in the interviews as an important aspect of their self-identity as women and as leaders. Portraiture also focuses on a description of context, in order to situate the phenomena under study in specific historical, national, cultural, political, social, and economic settings. Lawrence-Lightfoot describes context as a rich resource for the researcher's interpretation of the participants' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors about a particular phenomena (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1983).



Portraiture is concerned with coherence, with creating authentic narratives based on the belief that narratives and stories are valid structures through which people's identities are formed and shared (Collins 1998, 1999, 2000). Davis (2003) noted that the narratives in portraiture are useful tools for understanding how participants and the researcher make meaning in their lives. Jones (2003) observed that "portraiture's holistic core defies the androcentric view of analyzing research about black women from the deficit model by shifting away from primarily negative participant experiences" (70–71). Instead, portraiture is a search for goodness as opposed to the deficit model that is based on identifying problems and narrating pathologies (Davis 2003; Jones 2003; Lawrence-Lightfoot 1983; Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997). In that sense, the article takes a celebratory stance, whereby I spell out what works in spite of the challenges that women face in their roles as leaders.

As a qualitative research design, portraiture situates the researcher in a trusting and positive relationship with each participant (Davis 2003). This relationship is critical to the creation of an authentic portrait, one that is affirmed by the participant and the researcher alike, and one that honors them both (Davis 2003; Jones 2003). The researcher prepares in advance by reading all relevant literature about the people, the context, and the phenomenon, in order to communicate care and respect to the participants (Davis 2003; Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997). The researcher also participates in the research process as the principal research instrument.

I interacted directly with the women in the study, choosing how a particular line of inquiry would offer promise for answering the research questions at hand, determining moment-to-moment how to behave, what to notice, and what to record (Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman 2000). It was necessary for me to acknowledge my predilections and recognize how my identity has impacted the direction and process of the inquiry (Fine et al. 2000; Glesne 1999; Janesick 2000; Jones 2003; Ladson-Billings 2000). As a Kenyan woman who has been studying and is now working in the United States, I remain deeply committed to understanding, representing, and interpreting African women's experiences to wider audiences. I came into this study as a young woman interested in learning from the wisdom of her elders—the mothers and older sisters who made up this study.

Data collection included individual face-to-face interviews, focus group, note taking, and archival data in the form of books, newspaper, and magazine articles, brochures, and internet sources. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and the transcripts used for data analysis.<sup>3</sup>

### **Introducing the Participants**

The sixteen participants for this study were purposely selected through personal recommendations of my key liaison as well as the recommendations of the oldest participant, Ms. Muthoni Likimani. Some of the participating women leaders also suggested others in their circle whose stories, they felt, would add to the diversity and richness of the study. The women selected for this study: a) were at least forty years old; b) had at least ten years leadership experience; c) served as institutional entrepreneurs or organizational leaders; d) were black Africans; and e) engaged in social justice leadership. All the participants except one were Kenyans by birth; the other was a Sudanese who came to Kenya as a refugee during the civil war. All the women are also from the middle class. Therefore, the view of leadership presented

here is one practiced and experienced by women who are college educated, and whether they lead community-based, national, or continental organizations, theirs is mostly an elite perspective on leadership—as opposed to, for example, women leading in the village.

In this section, I will provide succinct descriptions of each participant to enable the reader to understand the context from which the lengthy quotations that illustrate the theme of servant-leadership were derived. In addition, the short descriptions also help the reader better grasp the sphere of influence of each woman, be it local, national, Pan-African, or global, in addition to providing relevant information regarding her marital and parental status. All the names used in this paper are the real names of the study participants, with the consent of the women leaders. The participants further clarified that using their real names indicated being connected to their stories; use of pseudonyms would be silencing rather than protecting them.

Ms. Muthoni Likimani (over 80 years of age) has experience as a broadcaster and political leader, and now spends her time writing and publishing; her most recent book is her autobiography, published in 2005. Her primary domain has been writing about women's involvement in the freedom struggle and their post-independence participation in nation building. Ms. Likimani retired from broadcasting and public relations more than two decades ago, but she is a keen observer and commentator about the political and religious situation in the country. She has been single since the late 1950s, when she was divorced from one of the pioneer African doctors in colonial Kenya, the late Dr. Likimani. She is a mother and doting grandmother.

Dr. Agnes Abuom (mid-50s) is vice president of the World Conference of Religions for Peace. At the time of the interviews in summer 2005, she was the Africa President for the World Council of Churches, and now serves on its executive committee. Dr. Abuom's specialties are economic justice and peace and reconciliation. She is an Anglican lay member and also an organization development consultant serving both Kenyan and international organizations. She is married and has two young sons.

Ms. Wahu Kaara (mid-50s) is a global economic justice activist who has been involved in the global call against poverty and debt relief campaigns and, at the time of the interviews, served as the ecumenical millennium development coordinator for the All African Council of Churches. She was a founding member and first director of the Kenya Debt Relief Network, an organization actively engaged in seeking debt cancellation and economic justice for the country. Ms. Kaara is widowed and has three adult children. She is an aspiring parliamentarian, having run for elected office in the last three general elections.

Dr. Jenifer Riria (late 50s) is the Chief Executive Officer of Kenya Women's Finance Trust, a micro-credit lending institution that targets women entrepreneurs with the purpose of providing them with credit facilities and business education. She is on several boards of governors of financial services organizations and a former professor at Kenyatta University. Dr. Riria is divorced and has three daughters; she describes her divorce as the most difficult challenge of her entire life.

Professor Faith Nguru (late 40s) is the director of research and consultancy at Daystar University, having risen through the ranks from junior lecturer to associate professor, and

through various administrative ranks. She is married to the president of Daystar University and inherited what she described as a ready-made family after the death of her husband's first wife: "I walked down the aisle single, and walked back as a wife, mother, and grandmother."

Ms. Njoki Wainaina (mid-60s) is a gender consultant who has been involved in gender and development work since the early seventies, and who was one of the pioneer executive directors of FEMNET (African Women's Communication and Development Network), a Pan-African organization started after the Nairobi UN Women's Conference of 1985. She is a wife, mother of three adult children, and grandmother.

Ms. Muthoni Wanyeki (early 40s) served as executive director of FEMNET until mid-2006 and was the youngest participant for this study. She is now the executive director of the Kenya Human Rights Commission. She is single and has no children.

Ms. Judy Thongori (mid-40s) is a human rights and women's rights lawyer who served as a director of the Federation of Women Lawyers, Kenya chapter. She is now in private practice and tithes part of her practice by providing pro bono legal services to poor women. She is married to fellow lawyer John Thongori and has two children.

Ms. Shiprah Gichaga (late 50s) is a widow and was the executive director of the Forum for African Women Educationalists, Kenya chapter, where she had been for about a decade. She is a veteran educator and spent several years as an inspector of schools for the Ministry of Education. Her work revolves around providing girls with access to education. Ms. Gichaga has four children and two grandchildren.

Ms. Anisia Achieng (early 40s) was the only woman who was not a Kenyan, having moved to the country as a Sudanese refugee. She has been working as a peace builder in her native Sudan as well as other conflict nations in Africa. Ms. Achieng is a sought-after speaker in many international meetings involving conflict resolution and peace building. She is divorced, the mother of two biological children and foster mother to one son.

There were two politicians in this group of women leaders; as of summer 2005, the Honorable Charity Ngilu (mid-50s) was the Minister for Health in the Kenyan Government, while the Honorable Beth Mugo (mid-60s) was the Assistant Minister for Education. Hon. Ngilu rose from being a secretary with the Central Bank of Kenya over twenty years ago, to a presidential candidate during the 1997 general elections. She is now widowed and has three children and, as of early 2008, is serving as the Minister for Water and Irrigation in the Grand Coalition government of Kenya. Hon. Mugo was an elementary school teacher in the late 1950s, became the wife of an ambassador in the '60s and '70s, and rose into her own role as a leader in the women's movement in the mid-'80s, before she joined electoral politics in 1992. She is a mother and grandmother, and is now serving as the Minister for Public Health and Sanitation, a new ministry formed as part of the Grand Coalition government in March 2008.

The Reverend Judy Mbugua (late 50s), a Pentecostal minister, was the first woman to be ordained in a traditional denomination in Kenya, a position that was many years in the making, with many tears and lots of negotiating. She started her adult life as a child-bride, having

dropped out of school at the age of sixteen to get married and, five children later, decided to obtain her high school certificate through correspondence. She progressed through the ranks in an insurance company, from a copy typist to a general manager, before she left industry to work in a faith-based institution that she pioneered—Pan African Christian Women’s Association (PACWA), a project of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa. Reverend Mbugua had earlier pioneered another institution, the Ladies Homecare Fellowship, to provide for women’s needs as mothers, widows, and wives, which is what led her to be recommended to start PACWA.

Professor Esther Mombo (mid-40s) is the Deputy Vice Chancellor<sup>4</sup> (Academic) at St. Paul’s University in Limuru, Kenya. Dr. Mombo is one of a very few women who have succeeded in shattering the stained glass ceiling in the Christian higher education realm. She has also been actively involved in advocating for the ordination of women in the Anglican Church of Kenya, of which she is a lay leader.

Ms. Eunice Ole Marima (early 60s) is a community organizer working amongst the Maasai community, where she has pioneered several institutions and organizations to help emancipate Maasai women from economic and cultural hardships. Prior to her early retirement from employment, Ms. Ole Marima worked with World Vision in communication and development. She and her husband, a one-time member of parliament for Narok, have five adult children and two grandchildren.

Finally, Ms. Priscilla Nangurai (early 60s) also works amongst the Maasai, but she is a pioneer in having started the first rescue center for Maasai girls—rescuing them from forced early marriages as well as economic hardships. She used African Inland Church Kajiado Girls’ Primary School, of which she was principal, as a rescue center for the girls. Her rescue mission was later emulated by Eunice Ole Marima who was part of the group that started Tasaru Rescue Center.

Both Ms. Ole Marima and Ms. Nangurai have a difficult task working with and for Maasai women and girls in a community that has faced many changes due to capitalist transformation amidst traditional practices. These transformations have resulted in what the two women described as a commoditization of Maasai girls through forced marriages to provide their fathers (and/or brothers) with needed cattle, cattle that are then exchanged in the cash economy. As the women described the situation, the practice of marrying girls off when they are as young as nine years old is not part of traditional Maasai culture, but rather is one of the new norms that is neither supported by traditional standards nor modern ones—it is a culture in flux, and some of the practices have marginalized the girl-child. A very low literacy level amongst the community for both girls and boys further complicates the context. These two women’s work is critical in emancipating the girls and women, giving them access to education and the tools necessary to succeed economically.

With these succinct introductions to the participants, I now turn to an elucidation of the main thesis of this paper; servant-leadership.

## **AFRICAN WOMEN AND SERVANT-LEADERSHIP**

### **A Redefinition**

Larry Spears discussed the notion of servant-leadership as a revolutionary concept that operates counter-culturally: “since the time of the industrial revolution, managers have tended to view people as objects; institutions have considered workers as cogs within a machine” (2002:2). However, the African women in this study illustrate the fact that servant-leadership is not counter-cultural in the traditional African context. In fact, they argue that capitalism, colonialism, and missionary Christianity have altered the servant-leadership attitudes of leaders due to the emergence of norms of individualism and competition. These women leaders argue that the notions of leadership as gendered male and the practices that emanate from modern and Western concepts of leadership are alien to their sensibilities as Africans and as women. For them, the concept of serving others is natural, inherent, and a sort of cultural genetic makeup—African women serve others, whether these are their immediate family, their communities, or the nation. Ms. Kaara redefined servant-leadership thus:

... leadership that provides [the leader] with a sense of fulfillment in serving others. That is the greatest strength we have as African women in leadership. I learned how to serve and lead by observing my grandmother and mother, so this is a heritage that we have, the training that the fulfillment of the being is the delivery of service to humanity. This, of course contradicts the paradigms perpetuated especially from the West that the fulfillment of the being comes from exploitation!

In the political field, Hon. Ngilu expressed her dismay at the brand of leadership demonstrated by her colleagues in elected office. She was convinced that if there were more women in parliament, and women who were willing to serve, they could make a difference:

I hope that some day soon, those in elected office will not be the masters, but instead will humble themselves to be servants of the people. This is where women come in because women have always been servants, right from their kitchens, their churches, their communities and their schools. Women are born servants, always ready to serve the family, the community, and soon the nation too. We haven't seen leaders yet because women have yet to arise.

Dr. Abuom explained her understanding of African women's approach to leadership thus:

I was saying that when you look at the continent and in this country in particular, I can see the resilience of the African women in terms of economic survival and ensuring that in spite of all the bartering of the family structure, she holds the unit together. She becomes the pillar. To leave her at the pictorial image of a beast is not telling the whole story.

Dr. Abuom proposed that African women aren't merely beasts of burdens, but rather, serve an important role of holding the family together through thick and thin. For these leaders, leadership through service was the chosen modus operandi, having observed from their grandmothers, mothers, and othermothers in the community that women were first and foremost service givers and this is partly how they fulfilled their purpose for being—something deep within African traditional cultures especially as relates to women. This is a leadership approach and practice that

is available to any woman, irrespective of her class, educational attainments, or ethnic background.

The other way that they traditionally fulfilled their purpose in life was through motherhood (Oyewumi 2003), that is, the birthing, nurturing, and sustaining of human life (Mbiti 1988). The women in this study have deconstructed and redefined motherhood from being merely a domestic role to one carried out in the public arena, where nurturing and sustaining of life are just as important as in the private sphere. Ms. Kaara was convinced that, whereas the triad of colonialism, Christianity, and capitalism has, to a large extent, washed over these traditional notions of leadership through service, a remnant can still be found amongst some women leaders, though not all, because many of the elite have been co-opted into ruling like men:

Those women in parliament have to take a deliberate move to practice politics in the new dispensation which I am arguing is the pedestal of women, a constructive way of doing things. But if you go on the politics of maneuver, of exploitation, of corruption, of men, and we know many women who have perfected that, because the women try to be men, and that is a misnomer.

Ms. Kaara illustrated that the approach to leadership that is respected, honored, and credible is the one that is service-oriented, particularly within this dynamic cultural milieu and political context. When women in parliament forget their origins as mothers and as servants of the community, they quickly lose credibility with their constituents. In discussing the servant as leader, Greenleaf prophetically observed that:

The signs of the times suggest that, to future historians, the next thirty years will be marked as the period when the dark skinned and the deprived and the alienated of the world effectively asserted their claims to stature, and that they were not led by privileged elite but by exceptional people from their own kind (1977:34).

The women leaders discussed here are a fulfillment of Greenleaf's apt prophecy—they are the dark skinned, deprived, and alienated who have arisen to serve their own kind in their search for social justice. I will illustrate the various ways in which the women articulated servant-leadership as their chosen and culturally relevant leadership approach.

### **Empowerment and an Ethic of Care**

Greenleaf conceptualized servant leaders as leaders who are committed to the growth of people (Greenleaf 1977). Spears (2002) talked about servant leaders as leaders who:

believe that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers... deeply committed to the growth of each and every individual... to nurture the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of employees (7, 8).

Ms. Kaara demonstrated this when she argued that it is time for women to take the reins of leadership in Africa, in order for there to be reconstruction and rebuilding after four decades of corruption and exploitation. She further said,

They [men in power] must exit and give us way, otherwise we will all perish, but women refuse to perish. I have no problem with men per se, but with the brand of leadership, which is ruling with an iron fist. The new leadership must be about what each person can

contribute to humanity, and history is showing us that this is the moment where women have the greatest opportunity to make their contribution to humanity. We build, we nurture, and we have constructive skills...

Similarly, Dr. Abuom argued for enabling women to articulate their approach to leadership, acquired on the hearth and in their private spheres of influence:

So when I look at women and leadership, I am saying there are traits and skills in women arising from both nature and nurture, the roles that women play in the home that involve multitasking, these have led to skills of inclusion, to negotiation, and to care... we have to turn around a leadership that is holistic, that is inclusive of all, that recognizes and upholds everybody.

To demonstrate practical ways that women leaders nurture, build, and reconcile in order to empower others, Dr. Mombo talked about her own experiences:

While I have been at this college, my conviction has been that I don't want to live alone in this high seat, but I want to ensure that many receive theological education. I found about ten women students but now there is about sixty. That has taken raising money for their support.

Similarly, Dr. Nguru talked about her own leadership and what she felt distinguishes her at Daystar University:

I think an important one is a serving attitude. How best can I serve these people? And then a willingness to play a coordinating role, recognizing the potential of the people you are working with and utilize the potential that I see in other people. And affirm the various gifts that you see around you and work with them to the best of your abilities.

These women leaders discussed some of the ways in which they and other women they have observed, both at the organizational and grassroots levels, articulate servant-leadership as a leadership that empowers and nurtures others. They also illustrate the fact that servant-leadership is inextricably linked to other qualities, including spirituality and the ability to correctly read or critique history. They demonstrate the cultural roots of women's leadership as servant-leaders intent on empowering others through inclusion, negotiation, and care.

### **Healing and Reconciliation**

Spears (2002) theorized that one of the greatest strengths of a servant leader is the ability to heal oneself and others. Servant leaders want "to make whole" both themselves and those they serve. As Greenleaf (1977) conceptualized, "there is something subtle communicated to one who is being served and led if, implicit in the compact between servant-leader and led, is the understanding that the search for wholeness is something they share" (36). These African women leaders may or may not explicitly state that they are searching for healing, but the very purpose of social justice is to heal the wounds of social injustice. Thus they seek to heal individuals, communities, societies, and nations in their work and words as leaders.

Dr. Abuom proposed a leadership that is based on pooling resources, what in Kenya is referred to as *Harambee*:

You bring what you have, and I bring what I have, so that we are in relationship. Because I don't have what you have, and you don't have what I have, so we are brought together so that you partake of mine and I partake of yours. This is a powerful way of thinking about it.

Ms. Nangurai expressed her desire to not only take girls away from their parents in order to provide them a safe haven to acquire education, but also to seek reconciliation with those parents once they began to understand the benefits of educating their children. She illustrates this point thus:

But when you see Charity [the first girl she rescued] and others like her, it's very encouraging. Charity is now an orphan, but reconciliation had already taken place with her parents. With her first salary she took her father a blanket seeking his blessings. Now she is the one who is taking care of her sisters and brothers.

Ms. Achieng's tales of the impacts of war in southern Sudan were heartrending. She talked about how women had initiated peace efforts in their country:

We want war stopped, because the war is killing people who were not involved in the decision. We know that there is a problem, but that problem does not need to mean killing people who are not involved. And those who question who are we, *we are not victims, we are actors* [emphasis mine]. That is the story of Sudan Women's Voices for Peace, formed in 1994 with the background of peace building and advocacy for human/women's rights. We want to speak for ourselves. We are not speaking only for women and children; we are speaking for the families here. We are speaking for security at home... We developed a program called seeds of peace. It's a counseling program to promote emotional healing for victims of war.

The women found it necessary to articulate their positions about women in society as a pro-family, pro-community position. As Ms. Achieng noted, they are speaking for themselves as women, but more importantly, they are speaking on behalf of families and communities that need sustenance, reconciliation, peace, and positive development. In each case, the women articulated how their personal experiences, professional exposure, and community needs interacted and led to their practice of healing as reconciliation, conflict resolution, trauma counseling, gender mainstreaming, and peace building. They also illustrate the notion of critique, engaging the systems in order to reconfigure them toward social justice ideals. As Greenleaf (1977) noted, critique without action is hopeless. These stories demonstrate how women engage in institutional entrepreneurship with the purpose of providing alternative institutions that meet social justice ideals for the common good.

## **Stewardship**

Servant-leadership assumes a commitment to serving the needs of others by using the tools at the leader's disposal (Spears 1995, 2002). Stewardship implies holding something in trust for another (Block 1993). Ms. Kaara was convinced that Africa's strength lies in the commitment her people have toward human solidarity:



That is the strength that Africa has, that together we can make it; that spirit of human solidarity, that commitment to not just exist but living, because living is participating and making your life practical and the essence of being. And for me, Africa will decide what becomes of it, because Africa is the only continent and to some extent Asia, where you find that the bedrock of the human spirit has not been defiled, that has not been broken, *that is determined to see future generations have something to inherit* [emphasis added]. Not for consumer purposes, but for propagating the purposes of creation and the purposes of continuity of humanity.

In the quote above, Ms. Kaara points to another aspect of leadership and motherhood—the desire to be stewards so that future generations would have something to inherit, based on their roles in propagating creation and the continuity of humanity. That is a role that, as women, they found themselves responding to and that demanded action toward liberation.

In historicizing the notion of stewardship, Ms. Likimani talked about how women in colonial times contributed to the freedom movement yet were left out of the discourse in the existing canon as recorded in textbooks. She said:

My interests are in women and development and it is what I write most about, because I feel they [women] have been ignored. When I was young, we had emergency, our people were fighting the colonialists, those were the Mau Mau or freedom fighters... You read so many books. You never see the name of a woman who fought. Have you ever read any? If you have, pass it on to me...

In Ms. Likimani's case, stewardship involved putting women back into history by writing about their involvement in the struggle for freedom. Her book *Passbook Number F 47927: Women and Mau Mau in Kenya* was written for this purpose. Several of her other books relate to women's involvement in the family and in society, in her attempt to demonstrate women's engagement in economic and social development of the nation.

Dr. Mombo's notions of stewardship included becoming a social mother by providing a home to children who needed one, in spite of the fact that becoming a foster parent as a single woman made her a constant target of gossip. As she explained,

I have fostered three sons, I am being asked to consider fostering a girl. Maybe I will. They are my family, though sometimes as a single parent you are seen as a monster. I give them an education and a home.

Each of these stories demonstrates the women's articulation of serving others through stewardship, ensuring that future generations would have hope through education, learning about their history, and engaging in the creation of a just society.

## **Building Community**

Greenleaf felt that in the United States much had been lost through the institutionalization of services that in prior generations were provided through local communities (1977). As such, he conceptualized servant-leaders as people who helped to build community within the institutions that they led. Community is still important in African contexts, even though forces such as

urbanization, globalization, and warfare may place community at risk. African women leaders work to strengthen existing communities, as well as re-create a sense of community where this may have been eroded.

Ms. Nangurai talked about creating community between girls and their estranged parents, in her role as principal of a girls' boarding school that also serves as a rescue center. She was of the opinion that reconciliation was imperative to maintaining family relationships, that educating the girls should not mean taking them away from their communities without the hope of a return. This reconciliation was particularly critical to the success of her mission, because community is celebrated amongst the Maasai who, as a pastoralist group, live in transitory villages. She explained:

We hold meetings with the parents to bring them on board to our programs. We also have reconciliation programs where we try to help them [the families] reconcile, and recognize that she is still their daughter. It is very difficult. We hold culture talks where old women come and talk to the girls about their culture. And sometimes we hold debates whereby we go through the cultures and say which ones are good, which ones are not, and some of them [old women] walk out in protest. Especially when we touch on circumcision, yet it's important for them [the girls] to know what is expected of them. Yeah, 'cause whatever they are, those are their parents.

As a parent herself, Ms. Nangurai felt it was necessary for the girls and their parents to maintain their familial relationships during the girls' schooling and beyond. She also felt the need to help the girls keep connected to their culture, even as she equipped them to be critical consumers of the same.

As a survivor of the war in Sudan and a peace builder, Ms. Achieng talked about working with both women and men because of the need to rebuild their war-ravaged country and recreate a sense of community in southern Sudan:

As we said, we are actors, we are not victims. We want to speak for ourselves. We are not speaking only for women and children; we are speaking for the families here. We are speaking for security at home—who is the main victim of war? It's that woman out there. Nobody cares for this woman. We spend time on men's care, but nobody is caring for the women. If we are talking about politics and about this war, we don't sleep... keeping peace, providing peace, and that is our identity. We also advocate that we are women, daughters, mothers, wives; we don't belong to any tribe because we can marry anybody.

With the strong sense of ethnicity being part of the cause of conflicts in most of Africa, Ms. Achieng's mantra that women belong to no tribe and every tribe served as part of her organization's (Sudan Women's Voice for Peace) method of reaching out to all Sudanese in recovering the lost sense of community. Additionally, she recognized that in caring for and about women, the organization was caring for and about the entire community.

For some African contexts, where years of war have left people displaced and disenfranchised, it means building peace in order to re-build community. In other contexts, building community can be more about developing an already existing community by empowering women economically in order for them to provide for their families, such as Dr. Riria does at Kenya Women's Finance

Trust. Such women engage in small-scale entrepreneurial undertakings, such as community schools and small-scale businesses. Critical to their understanding of service is the notion of rebuilding or strengthening families in order to rebuild and strengthen communities and, in that way, strengthen the nation as a whole.

The importance of community in the African context cannot be overemphasized. *Ubuntu*, that African worldview that regards individual identity in terms of community identification, continues to be strong (Mbigi 1996). Ubuntu means “being fully human” and is derived from Bantu languages of Eastern and Southern Africa. As described by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, “A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or tortured or oppressed.” So when Africans say, *I am because we are, and because we are, I am*, it is not simply a mantra but a complete worldview that recognizes community as pivotal to individual identity. It is no wonder then that the women leaders actively engaged in building and restoring community were articulating what it meant for them to be women and leaders in the African context. In addition to building community, the women referred to their leadership as service that is compelled by a spiritual source.

### **Servant-leadership as Spiritual Leadership**

The women leaders constantly engaged in God-talk, using terms with religious overtones to explain and describe their experiences, especially in relating the source of their leadership practices. They explained how they find fulfillment in serving humanity—otherwise they would not do the kinds of work that require so much effort and struggle, often receiving very little gratitude (Ngunjiri 2006b). They defined servant leaders as the kinds of leaders who find fulfillment in serving humanity. For them, servant-leadership and spirituality are intricately connected; some of them referred to it in Judeo-Christian terminology, others did not. As citizens of dual realities—African traditional religious spirituality and Christian traditions—they also explain their servant-leadership as modeled after Jesus or Biblical examples. This illustrates the syncretistic leanings of currently expressed African spirituality—having both strong Christian and African traditional values. Ms. Gichaga talked about her approach to leadership thus:

One is to emulate Jesus who was the best teacher and the greatest leader of all. As a leader, he was also a servant. I try to utilize some of his teaching in servant leader. And a little earlier I said I am a people person and that again has impacted on me, because for me as a God-fearing person, every person is important. And it has created peace in the office... The other thing is just humility.

Dr. Riria also talked about humility as part of what makes up her leadership, humility that she learned through her Catholic schooling: “We were taught humbleness, when you get to a point that you think you can’t, then get somebody to do it for you. So it taught us to trust ourselves but also to trust the input of others.” Similarly, Ms. Thongori talked about having learned humility from her mentor:

Lee taught me the humility that ought to attend to the practice of law. When we came from law school, we were not taught to serve. We graduated so that we could come to the

city, make money, and actually be served as it were. I learned about service, and service for me is basic.

Similarly, Dr. Nguru talked about humility and service:

By using Biblical terminology, one would say not to lord it over the people. You come around a table, people want to be affirmed to reach their potential and, in that way, they perform to their best—recognizing them, helping them maintain their dignity, and helping them to do their best.

Each of the women in this study talked about humility, dignity, the worth of each individual person, and service as skills and qualities acquired through their leadership training in religious schools or from mentors. Greenleaf (1977) and Spears (2002) described servant leaders as people who felt the need to serve, who then seek to lead in order to serve. Such leaders are humble, they empower those they lead, they are interested in building community, and they affirm and encourage those they lead to reach their full potential, as illustrated by these African women leaders. In addition, the African women leaders ascribe their learning to be servant leaders from their traditional culture, where women served their families and communities not only by carrying out domestic roles, but also by being warriors, healers, mediums, and prophetesses. They talked about learning to lead by observing their mothers, grandmothers, and othermothers in their communities during their formative years. The women made connections between motherhood and their practice and experience in organizational leadership.

### **Servant-leadership as Motherhood Made Public**

These women leaders regarded their ability to lead as servant leaders as something they have learned from their mothers, grandmothers, and othermothers. They also constantly referred to their positions as mothers of their own biological children as a source of compulsion to lead, as well as skills to lead in public. They demonstrated how for them as African women, being mothers was paramount to their identity, and an important criterion upon which their credibility as leaders was based. Ms. Kaara had this to say:

I learned a lot from both grandmothers, paternal and maternal, because I lived with them and they were great women. Like my maternal grandmother who was a widow, there was something very special about her capacity of dealing with issues that were stumbling block for her, like providing food to a multitude of children, resolving a myriad of conflicts, resourcefulness. That has been the driving force which now I see as the greatest attribute that the African women, especially from my community, have—that self-determination, self-drive which is to serve society. Because mothers of Africa, their self-determination is... to serve humanity, to provide, to protect, and to give security.

In a similar vein, Hon. Mugo talked about observing and learning from her own mother: And I remember my mother saying, are you going to get education. She was very upset because my mother had been a women's leader; they are the ones who built Githunguri, the girl's school. She used to take my brother on her back all the way from Gatundu, they walked to go and build the girls hostel. That's how they valued girls' education.

Hon. Mugo dropped out of school when she got married, but she promised her mother that she would return, which she did in honor of her mother's active engagement in girls' education.

Furthermore, she was able to continue her mother's legacy by serving as assistant Minister of Education.

Dr. Riria was convinced that women and girls need role models that they can emulate, other women who have succeeded and who demonstrate a serving attitude in the community. She argued that:

First of all, we need to provide role models; women have to consciously do that. The way I handle myself in the society, I want a little girl to want to look like me. And I am not just talking about myself, I am talking about the women in positions. Being a mother is holy—I *don't know what I would have done if I didn't have children, thank you Lord!* [emphasis added] But some of us have been told that's all we are good at. Yet we are also good as leaders, bankers, lawyers. There has to be role modeling to move [younger women] from this stage to another. At the leadership level, at the political level, we also have to have leaders that we can emulate. And leaders have to know that they are being looked up to.

For Dr. Riria, her motherhood and her leadership were intricately interconnected, to the extent that she felt she was a better leader because she was a mother, and she was a better mother because of the roles she played in the public arena.

Ms. Judy Thongori, a mother of two children and an activist lawyer in the area of women's rights, also talked about the connections between being in public leadership and being a mother. Whereas she felt that connecting women's credibility as leaders to their status as mothers was problematic, arguing that even those who have no children are competent leaders, she was cognizant of the role motherhood played in her own life as a lawyer who was constantly in the public eye. She described an experience she had where the media interviewed her and asked whether she would talk about her family, because the writers had noticed most of the women whose stories appeared in the newspaper as women in leadership were divorced or never married. Whereas she was willing to talk about her family, she was experiencing a conflict:

But the reason for me is because people have tended to accept it easier if you are a family person and they can be able to slot me as a mother and a wife. And I felt no, we need to fight this mindset and we need to show people that it's about our capacity that matters. So let's talk about our professional life; I didn't mind them knowing about my family life but I would rather they accepted me as a professional first before the wife and mother. But nonetheless, I would like to bring my family to the fore because I would like people to know about that. Because I would like those who are looking up to us to know that we get completed by our babies, we want them to know that our marriages are working.

Ms. Thongori demonstrates the double-edged sword that is the high social status ascribed to mothers, showing that while it privileges mothers, it places childless women at a disadvantage in the society's eyes, by making them seem less competent. That would be the opposite of the research in the US, where mothers are seen as less competent than their childfree sisters in the workforce (Correll, Bernard, and Paik 2007). Dr. Mombo is a good example of someone whose credibility was questioned on account of her being single and childfree, as she said that often men in meetings would dismiss her and tell her to "go get a husband." Eventually she fostered three children out of her personal desire to provide them with a family, but that came with

challenges because she is still unmarried and fostering is not given the same status as biological motherhood, especially for a single woman.

In summing up the connection between motherhood and leadership, Dr. Abuom argued that women are not their own worst enemies, as the adage goes. In fact, she maintained that women make good use of their friendships, they have learned to survive and thrive against many odds, and they do this collectively:

I think the woman's position as a mother, it really gives a woman the capacity to revere, to have compassion for life. And also whenever issues of life are at stake, the woman is at the center of that discussion. That is number one. The second one has to do with the experience of pain and suffering: *struggle refines* [emphasis added]. Struggle is like a furnace that refines the iron. Because the woman is born and is conditioned to struggle, that has refined her to exist, survive the odds; because *culture, tradition, and economy* [emphasis added] have put her as the underdog. So that struggle of survival and affirming life that she has. The third one I think is the solidarity that is never really brought to the fore between women. That there is a collective mass of oppressed people, and they see others who have made it, and say why not me. That is always under-estimated by the prejudice of women are enemies of women which is not true. In fact the source of strength, for many women is other women. That I think is *the collective mass of the oppressed that creates solidarity and economy of association within women* [emphasis added]. Those for me are the key ones: biological role, refinement by struggle, and the collective mass of solidarity.

The women leaders articulated the source of their self-determination, resiliency, and leadership motivation as derived from their roles as mothers, and as learned from their own mothers and grandmothers. As such, they demonstrate that for them, being and becoming servant leaders who are committed to their community, nation, and continent was directly related to their roles as mothers. They were extending their private roles of being mothers to their public roles of caring for, nurturing, and sustaining life. The struggles that African women have faced historically as the underdogs in their own patriarchal communities, and the lowest of the marginalized in the global economic order, create in them the urgency to serve social justice ideals. In other words, these women articulated their pride in being mothers, but they take that role to the public domain where they find fulfillment in serving humanity.

## **RESONANCE**

In African traditions, motherhood was highly revered (Mbiti 1988; Oduyoye 1995); it remains a highly regarded social status for African women in contemporary society. These African women leaders have learned to articulate a public role by becoming mothers not only to their own biological children, but to entire communities and nations. They take pride in their roles as mothers; they are quick to self-identify as mothers even before introducing themselves as leaders, educators, or politicians. Motherhood is a highly contested terrain in many settings, especially with the emergence of feminist political agency. In North America, mothers sometimes experience a penalty in workplace settings because of the notion that they are not able to concentrate as well, and are therefore less competent than women who have no children (Correll, Bernard, and Paik 2007). However, in Africa for the most part, motherhood provides

women with a status elevation in society because children are highly valued and mothers revered (Nnoromele 2002; Oduyoye 1995; Opefeyitimi 1998; Oyewumi 2003). This does not mean that women's entry into public and organizational leadership is a walk in the park; rather, for those women who are in leadership, being mothers provides them with credibility as well as skills for leadership (Bauer 2004). These women leaders demonstrate how they have put that status to good use, by articulating a public leadership that is partly dependent upon their experiences as mothers. But they go beyond just their status as mothers, to demonstrate that they are concerned political leaders, competent bankers and managers, contributing to the economic and social development of their communities (Bauer 2004; Tamale 2000; Tripp 2001; Uraizee 2000). As Bauer (2004) aptly noted in her article title, the women demonstrate that *the hand that stirs the pot can also run the country*.

The women leaders explained that their roles as mothers have enabled them to become servant-leaders—leaders who are concerned about social justice for those who are economically, educationally, culturally, and socially marginalized. Servant-leadership is a concept that has gathered a lot of adherents in the Western world since the 1970s when Robert Greenleaf wrote his famous essay, *The Servant as Leader*, which precipitated the servant-leadership movement. These African women articulate a version of servant-leadership in their context, as mothers and othermothers intent on bringing about community and organizational transformations. Their leadership aims at healing and reconciliation, empowering others to act, being stewards of their communities and nation, having redefined servant-leadership as the kind that involves *finding fulfillment in serving humanity*.

I have illustrated how for these women, servant-leadership emerged from a cultural source in their own traditions; learned from their grandmothers, mothers, othermothers, and professional mentors with purposes of strengthening families, rebuilding communities, altering unjust social structures, and healing nations. Whereas their professional training as teachers, lawyers, social workers, business managers, and political scientists prepared them for the technical aspects of their roles, their “training upon the hearth,” in their roles as mothers and othermothers, equipped them with skills in negotiation, nurturance, conflict resolution, and care necessary in their leadership for social justice. As these women leaders demonstrated how their servant-leadership is spiritual leadership, leaders and academics alike can be inspired to take courage to act, allowing our spirituality to infuse our leadership and our life's work.

I am persuaded that more studies of leadership in non-Western, marginalized, and disenfranchised populations are necessary in order to broaden our understanding of leadership theory and practice. Furthermore, studies utilizing qualitative, quantitative, mixed, and emerging methodologies are necessary to broaden our comprehension of servant-leadership as well as other styles and practices of leadership in various contexts. Studies among women are particularly necessary as we continue to recognize that so-called feminine leadership styles are actually the styles needed to heal nations, to grow organizations, and to strengthen relationships—such as collaboration, negotiation, community building, and ethic of care (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2002; Lipman-Blumen 2000; Reid-Merritt 1996; Wilson 2004). The fact that the women in this study not only lead in women's organizations, but in mainstream institutions of education, government, non-profits, and business may demonstrate that indeed women who lead *as women*, retaining their maternal roles as nurturers, caregivers, and servants

of the people can be and are effective as leaders (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt 2001; Lipman-Blumen 2000). As such, continued studies of women in leadership positions may throw more light on this phenomenon and encourage both practitioners and researchers alike to learn the styles, practices, and approaches to leadership most effective for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In addition, studies on motherhood and leadership in other contexts would be welcome in expanding our understanding of women's experiences as leaders. As demonstrated through the African data from these Kenyan women, motherhood is closely connected to leadership for women in their context: it gives them social credibility that enables them to function as leaders in the public domain. Their own mothers and grandmothers provided them with (non-elite) models of leadership that expand our understanding of servant-leadership by demonstrating that serving others is fulfilling and is a form of leadership; and their responsibilities and roles as mothers generated and convinced them of the need to engage in leadership because they wanted to propagate and sustain humanity in their particular contexts. As such, their being mothers contributed to their conviction to engage in social justice leadership, whether it was in (for example) providing legal aid to the poor as Ms. Thongori did, economic justice to marginalized nations as Ms. Kaara, or access to education as done by Ms. Gichaga and Ms. Nangurai. This seems to also be true in the case of women in Uganda (Tamale 2004) and Namibia (Bauer 2004), where women seek access to leadership partly based on their roles as mothers. More research is needed to investigate whether African women in other African countries as well as the Diaspora have similar perceptions and experiences that connect motherhood and leadership.

Whereas servant-leadership literature seems to assume that the servant leaders are men, this study demonstrates women's articulation of servant-leadership that is context-specific and gendered female. The women's identities are closely tied to their motherhood, as well as to the service they provide in their roles as CEOs, principals, executive directors, government ministers, Deputy Vice Chancellors, etc. Whereas their public positions can and do change often, their roles as leaders intent on serving their communities do not. The hand that stirs the pot can and does run a company, a school, a ministry, a university, a non-governmental organization, a legal aid organization, etc.

The African data demonstrate that servant-leadership is *cultural* in the Kenyan context, rather than counter-cultural as Greenleaf (1977) and Spears (2002) argued for the West, even though as the women leaders demonstrate, it may also be gender-specific in their context. The data also help to transcend Greenleaf and Spears' conceptions of servant-leadership, expanding it and also redefining it as leadership that involves finding fulfillment in serving humanity, for the purpose of propagating and sustaining humanity. For these Kenyan women, motherhood and leadership are distinct yet related aspects of their self-identity as women—and for many of these women, being mothers was part of their *raison d'être* for their engagement in social justice-oriented leadership. As such, studies interrogating the experiences of mothers who are also leaders in other spheres within African and other contexts, both Global North and Global South countries, would greatly aid our understanding of servant-leadership and leadership for social justice.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kenyan African women, as opposed to Kenyan women of other races. As a former colonized state, Kenya contains people who claim citizenship by birth yet belong to other races, including whites descended from British settlers and Indians descended from those brought to work on the East African Railways at the turn of the last century.

<sup>2</sup> Othermothers is a term used within African American literature to refer to women who serve as mothers to children other than their own, children who find themselves destitute; or simply women who extend their mothering beyond their own blood families to other children in the community (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2002). The term is an apt descriptor for the roles that many African women play as mothers to many children—the notion that “it takes a village to raise a child” would be the practical application of the term. In most African communities, legal adoptions and fostering are rare, but women will take in children who need a family and look after them as if they were their own, and this is expected, even encouraged, as part of African culture.

<sup>3</sup> Data Analysis Procedures: Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) suggested that “the portraitist enters the field with a clear intellectual framework and guiding research questions, but fully expects the adaptation of both her intellectual agenda and the methods to fit the context and the people she is studying” (186). The data analysis process was an iterative one, beginning with the initial entry into the research site and lasting through the total research process. Having an a priori conceptual framework helped in guiding the data collection as well as the analysis process.

At the close of each day, I gathered, scrutinized, and organized data in a journal as Impressionistic Records, “a ruminative thoughtful piece that identifies emerging hypotheses, suggests interpretations, describes shifts in perspectives, points to puzzles and dilemmas that need attention, and develops a plan of action for the next visit” (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997:188). The writing of the Impressionistic Record continued throughout the research process, such that data gathering and data analysis occurred hand-in-hand.

As soon as each interview was completed, I transcribed the taped conversation: I felt it was best to do my own transcribing, as listening to the conversations a second time became part of data analysis. I perused the transcribed interviews as they became available, looking for areas that needed further clarification as well as emerging themes (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997). I took back my initial interpretations and the transcripts to the participants as a form of member checking. Sometimes I went to second interviews, where these were possible, with a new set of questions to clarify issues that arose as I transcribed and did the read-through. The member checking helped to elucidate areas that needed further clarification as well as verify accuracy of the transcribed notes. I combined iterative coding, writing analytic field notes and Impressionistic Records, transcribing taped interviews, and analyzing documents with further coding in cycles that continued throughout the fieldwork and research process; that is, constantly describing, analyzing, and interpreting the data as I proceeded with the conversations. This open coding, unitizing, or categorizing helped me to come up with initial categories (Jones 2003; Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997).

Next, I organized the categories more systematically through axial coding, where the original categories were condensed into fewer and more precise categories (Creswell 1998; Jones 2003; Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997). I used a second reader external to the university to affirm my thematic categories by talking through the themes with her and attempting to clarify the categories I had applied. This process was very useful, especially as the data turned out to be

so thick it was necessary to have an extra set of eyes to confirm or disconfirm some of the sub-themes that I came up with to support and or expand the initial conceptual framework. I made use of the reader's recommendations to clarify or condense the themes. The second reader was at the time a doctoral student as well as a Kenyan woman familiar with the culture and context. She was very helpful in assisting me with translating some of the language and explaining the names of various historical figures that participants mentioned throughout the conversations that would make sense to her and to me but not to a non-Kenyan audience.

<sup>4</sup> The Vice Chancellor in a Kenyan university is the equivalent of a president in US universities. As such, Dr. Mombo is the number two (similar to a provost) in charge of academics at St. Paul's University.

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