Barriers to Middle-level Academic Leadership for Female Academics in Nigerian Higher Education

Sharon Adetutu Omotoso*

Abstract

With a rising number of women in middle-level higher education leadership, vast opportunities abound. Yet middle-level female academics are faced with sticky floors that jeopardise their significant inflow to senior leadership positions. By arguing that intra-feminist issues pertaining to higher education leadership's leaky pipeline have not gained sufficient attention, this study interrogates internal dynamics among middle-level female academics, to identify threats to the prevalent notion of universal sisterhood that ought to boost women's efforts at countering forces that militate against their upward movement in higher education (HE) leadership. This ethnographic work will engage with the literature, trends and narratives that are shaping women's leadership in HE in West Africa, specifically among middle-level female academics in Nigeria's public and private universities. Responding to the question of place-making for women in higher education leadership – at whose expense and to what end? – the study submits that beyond acclaimed androcentric barriers to women's participation and representation in senior higher education leadership, there are less visible contributory factors among womenfolk, which lead to role entrapment and spatial entrapment. The study proposes symbiotic interactionism for female academics to attain and remain in the upper echelons of HE leadership.

Keywords: middle-level university leaders, female academics, higher education leadership, symbiotic interactionism

* Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan. Email: sa.omotoso@ui.edu.ng; sharonomotoso@gmail.com

Résumé

La présence croissante des femmes aux postes de direction de niveau intermédiaire dans l'enseignement supérieur ouvre un boulevard d'opportunités. Les femmes universitaires de niveau intermédiaire n'en sont pas moins confrontées à des obstacles qui compromettent leur accès aux postes de direction. En partant du principe que les questions intra-féministes relatives au « tuyau percé » (parcours parsemé d'embûches) dans l'enseignement supérieur n'ont pas reçu suffisamment d'attention, cette étude interroge les dynamiques internes au sein des femmes universitaires de niveau intermédiaire, afin d'identifier les menaces à la notion prévalente de solidarité féminine universelle qui devrait stimuler les efforts des femmes pour contrer les forces qui militent contre leur mouvement ascendant dans l'enseignement supérieur (ES). Ce travail ethnographique se penchera sur la littérature, les tendances et les récits qui façonnent le leadership féminin dans l'enseignement supérieur en Afrique de l'Ouest, en particulier chez les femmes universitaires de niveau intermédiaire dans les universités publiques et privées du Nigeria. Répondant à la question de la création d'une place pour les femmes dans le leadership de l'enseignement supérieur (aux dépens de qui et dans quel but) l'étude soutient qu'au-delà des barrières androcentriques reconnues pour la participation et la représentation du leadership féminin dans les hautes instances de l'enseignement supérieur, il existe des facteurs contributifs moins visibles chez les femmes, qui mènent au piège des rôles et au piège spatial. L'étude propose un interactionnisme symbiotique pour que les femmes universitaires atteignent et restent dans les échelons supérieurs de la gestion de l'enseignement supérieur.

Mots-clés : gestionnaires d'université de niveau intermédiaire, femmes universitaires, leadership dans l'enseignement supérieur, interactionnisme symbiotique.

Introduction

The importance of higher education as a crucial asset for the knowledge economy, technological advancement and socioeconomic reconstruction has been historically emphasised by scholars (Dearing 1997; Bloom et.al. 2005; Materu 2007; Omotoso 2010; Oanda 2013b). Globally, higher education (HE) plays significant roles in nation-building, contributing both human and intellectual power for national development within its three cardinal functions – research, teaching and service. Beyond these, the entire paraphernalia of managing HE has been strongly influenced by internationalisation. Noting how the higher education sector in Africa has attracted attention from internal and external stakeholders, educational institutions in Africa are still fraught with challenges, including a weak

research base and poor governance, little access to funds and concerns about poor quality, among others (Jowi 2013). In Mauritania, the Ministry for Higher Education and Scientific Research (MESRS) is responsible for tertiary education. Problems stemming from overcrowding on campus, theory-based curriculum and low skill competencies breed failures to meet the country's needs, hence raising the country's unemployment level (Agyeman 2007). In their discourse on HE in Liberia, Gbollie and David (2014) raise questions of expansion versus quality. Stating that the quality of higher education being offered by colleges and universities remains a contentious issue despite the implementation of some reform mechanisms by government, they argue that some of the hidden challenges confronting HE quality in Liberia seem more political than educational.

As important as the quality of HE is, this work considers the quality of the leadership that drives the expected quality of HE to be equally important. Leadership entails capacity: 'the ability to skillfully encourage dialogue between all levels of decision-making, to establish processes and transparency in decision-making, to articulate values and visions clearly but not impose them' (Omotoso 2013: 58). In Nigeria, with over 100 universities, HE leadership contends with a large student population, frequent unrests due to students' riots and staff strike actions, an unstable academic calendar due to frequent closure of campuses, and a low quality of education and graduates, all closely linked to the instability of government policies (Onwuejeogwn 1992; Muoghalu 2018). This resonates with the identified disconnect between national-level policies and institutional realities (Jowi, Obamba and Sehoole 2013), which has resulted in setbacks in producing knowledge-based economies within Africa.

Quality leadership resonates with an understanding of global best practices, a consciousness of the need for transparency and accountability and a focus on institutional objectives for the improvement of HE within selected boundaries. For instance, quality leadership could be stifled by government regulations whereby the government retains supervisory authority over universities and appoints senior university managers, as occurs in Benin, Cameroon and Togo. Other factors that play a determinative role (Bloom 2005) in leadership are sensible macroeconomic management, good governance and openness to trade. Combined with these constituents, HE is indeed value-laden and it then becomes imperative to engage in a critical study of leadership as a prominent element of HE.

Within the discourse of HE, key issues of content, players and methodology have remained central. While this study does not discount content and methodology, it focuses on the players, among whom are

middle-level staff saddled with HE leadership and management, tasked with achieving institutional mandates alongside personal aspirations (Jowi 2013; Oanda 2013a). Administrative leadership as well as private-sector leadership roles held by middle-level academics make this an important group because it is from this cadre that the top management of universities are drawn globally, in the hope that they have gathered sufficient leadership skills by experience. Thus, as much as HE provides platforms for self-development and social transformation, it equally opens up spaces for power and gender relations.

About 30 per cent of businesses in Africa employ women in senior roles (Grant Thornton 2018). Discussing the constructions of women's roles and status in vocational education in Togo, Goura and Seltzer-Kelly (2013) recognised that patriarchal attitudes and authoritarian structures in Togolese society breed complications that are connected with women's social autonomy and economic self-sufficiency. The largely patriarchal systems that operate across Nigerian communities also have a strong influence on leadership patterns. They reiterate how HE reimages leadership frameworks. When a community raises a culture-based argument that men are born to be leaders and women to be followers, there is an increased tendency to absorb more men than women into leadership roles. This might have influenced leadership trends within higher institutions, which is why this study pays specific attention to women's leadership within HE.

Morley (2013) identifies key focus areas of analytical frameworks on women in HE leadership as follows: gendered divisions of labour, gender bias and misrecognition, management and masculinity, greedy organisations, and work/life balance challenges. Pereira argued in 2002 that it took women several years to enter higher education, hence the few female professors in universities. The number of women in faculties in Nigeria's higher institutions has since improved significantly (Adu-Oppong and Arthur 2015). This increase has also afforded women's participation mainly at the middle level but not in senior positions in HE leadership.

With slight variations in most parts of the world, women's representation in HE leadership has remained unstable. Although no known law prevents women's participation in HE leadership, subtle discriminations, threats and exclusion persist (Muoghalu 2018). These have been variously described as 'a problem without a name' (Friedan 1963), 'the hidden transcript' (Morley 2006), 'the hidden curriculum' (Mejuini 2013), all of which make women's reluctance to participate in leadership in higher education look natural. Many women leak out of the leadership pipeline when they fail to overcome barriers to their upward advancement. While the leaky pipeline phenomenon describes a progressive 'evaporation' or disappearance of

women as they advance in their career, this work discusses leadership's leaky pipeline in HE, pertaining to how middle-level female academics thin out of leadership as they advance in their career.

Beyond these and the structured interventions developed to encourage more women to enter leadership positions in universities, this study investigates other leakages possibly triggered via intra-feminist dynamics among mid-level career women in Nigeria's HE leadership. This study is divided into five sections, beginning with the introduction. The second section discusses the literature on women in HE; section three presents the theory and method of the study; section four focuses on the burden of middle-level female academics in HE leadership from selected Nigerian universities; and section five concludes the study.

Extant Literature on Women in HE Leadership

In the recent past, the patriarchal nature of most societies has deliberately described the home, child-bearing, child-rearing and other domestic responsibilities as the private life, whereas issues regarding leadership and decision-making in the polis belong essentially to the public life. Whereas men have held on to the public life sphere, it appears that the private life sphere remains strictly the terrain of women. This means that when considered within feminist frameworks, HE leadership has retained a masculine vocabulary.

The earliest universities in West Africa, located in Sierra Leone, Ghana and Nigeria (where the first university was established in 1948), maintained a largely male faculty. As has been argued in other spheres, the need for place-making for women in HE has been largely discussed only since the turn of the twenty-first century. This has led to the deployment of affirmative action, quota systems and targets (Odejide 2003; Morley 2013), with the sole aim of creating equity-driven participation and representation of women in HE leadership. Progressively, across the globe, there are heart-warming success stories of female advancement in leadership gained through quota systems, appointments and legislation, yet this movement is found mostly at junior to middle levels (Morley 2014). In 2017, Nyoni et al. observed that 'gender disparity in Higher Education leadership is still a comprehensive subject, even though more women have been approved for leadership positions in universities' (Nyoni et al. 2017: 46). With reference to the 'ivory basement', a critical study of leadership roles given to women shows that they are often likely to be tasked with departmental welfare, deputising for men and secretarial roles at committees, among others. Stronger decision-making roles and accountability are largely denied to women.

Scholars have extensively acknowledged the plight of women in HE, mostly based on how women are caught between two greedy institutions – the extended family and the university (Onsongo 2004; Kamau 2006; Tsikata 2007). Just as family demands take their toll on women, the university also has high expectations of women, particularly those holding leadership positions. In their work on middle-level university leaders, Garza Mitchell and Eddy (2015) affirm a masculine norm and a prevalent 'ideal worker framework', which may be a disincentive for women to move up. They further note that because middle-level leaders are not motivated to seek advancement, institutions lose out on a wider range of diverse leaders to take over critical senior positions. For them, 'traditional conceptions of male leadership as the norm, a lack of succession planning and leadership development, and missed opportunities for expansion of collective leadership in the university setting' are barriers to women's upward movement in higher education leadership (Garza Mitchell and Eddy 2015: 79).

Although Morley (2014) agrees with the findings of the masculinisation, neoliberalisation, globalisation and managerialisation of the academy, she speculates that women may be exercising their personal decision to reject the situational logic of career progression. This may imply that, considering the limitations and challenges, many women may not consider top-level leadership desirable, an idea connected with Berlant's 'cruel optimism', in which leadership roles become an obstruction to career progress (Berlant 2011). The literature has considered marginalisation, under-representation, exclusionism, risk minimisation and the cruel optimism school of thought as drawbacks to women's upward movement in HE leadership (Berlant 2011). It has thus attempted to answer whether women desire senior leadership roles, are dismissing the roles or are being disqualified. Validating the existence of a largely masculinised HE environment, David (2015) questions the possibility of universities to achieve genuine gender equality across all students and academics in HE.

In addition, there is a core, yet underexplored array of factors that could contribute to or facilitate women's difficulties in moving to senior positions of HE leadership . This is captured within intra-feminist attitudes; an approach that scrutinises women-to-women relations to see if they contribute to the already identified challenges of middle-level female academics' inability to move up HE leadership ladders.

Theory and Method of the Study

The theoretical underpinnings of this study hinge on role entrapment and spatial entrapment. Entrapment may be described as the inability to escape from a situation, wherein the target (the party to be entrapped) is ensnared by human or structural agents (the entrapping party).

Although the spatial entrapment thesis provides a general explanation 'based on an empirical regularity, or on the assertion of an empirical regularity, which relates women's gender roles to spatial limitations, particularly in terms of women's commuting distances and job-search areas' (England 1993: 236), spatial entrapment in this work is associated with how women are limited within a space (specifically the middle level) in their career in HE leadership, thereby minimising their performance or rendering them perpetually stuck at a level with little or no hope of progress in view. Issues that contribute to spatial entrapment are: difficulty in pursuing research and gaining tenure, the dual responsibilities of traditional and professional roles, and career interruptions (Dines 1993).

Role entrapment thesis draws largely from the leadership structures of higher education that allow for turn-taking via rotational and fixed terms (Morley 2013). Within this context, role entrapment describes how women are restricted to certain roles, offices and job descriptions for various socially constructed reasons, including misrecognised competence (Odejide, Akanji and Odekunle 2006) and minimising risk, thus creating space in senior positions mainly for men (Ibarra, Carter and Silva 2010). The spatial entrapment thesis affirms an observed cycle, which limits women's ability to thrive outside certain spaces (Kwesiga 2002). This could result from how they have been role-entrapped. This work recognises that role entrapment and spatial entrapment are closely connected in the discourse of gender and middle-level HE leadership. They establish how women's constructed roles within the institutions operate to hold them back at certain spaces and play recurring roles, with little or no hope of upward progress.

This study adopts a case study approach for critical and interpretative analysis. Data is sourced from two universities in Nigeria: the University of Ibadan (UI) and Covenant University (CU). The University of Ibadan was the first university in Nigeria to be established (1948) and is a public university under the Federal Government of Nigeria, whereas Covenant University is a privately owned, faith-based institution, established in 2002. Just as the University of Ibadan is an Ivy League institution in Nigeria, Covenant University ranks high in private university ratings, with a fairly large number of academic staff and a track record of commendable HE

leadership (World University Ranking 2018). In-depth interviews were conducted with eight purposively selected female academics (four at middle level and four at senior level, holding offices such as head of department, centre director, sub-dean and dean) across the two selected institutions. A semi-structured, open-ended questionnaire was also provided to fifty middle-level female academics across the two selected institutions.

In its seventy years of existence, UI has employed no female vice-chancellor and only three female deputy vice-chancellors. CU employed Professor Aize Obayan, a female vice-chancellor, from 2005 to 2012. Data from both institutions reflects how many women take leadership at the mid-level but not at senior levels.

Table 1 presents the distribution of the University of Ibadan's university management – dean, directors of institutes, professors,[1] acting heads of department and secretariat – by gender. One may see that the female composition of the management team in the university began to shift in their favour only from 2016 to 2017. This attempt at gender parity gave birth to gender policy at the University of Ibadan.

The deans of faculties were overwhelmingly male, but there was a marginal increase in the number of female deans from 2015 to 2017, reflecting the university's effort to increase women's representation at leadership levels of the institution. The ratio of male to female directors of institutes was more evenly balanced, although still favouring male incumbents. Between 2013 and 2017 there were more male professors than female ones. This could be attributed to an increase in role entrapment at middle level experienced by female professors than their male counterparts. During this time there was an upward trend in the number of women in the position of acting head of department showing how women get increasingly moved into the middle-level leadership.

Table 2 presents the distribution of university management, deans, professors and heads of department by gender at Covenant University. From 2013 to 2016, of the eighteen management staff, seventeen (94.4 per cent) were male while one (5.6 per cent) was female. In 2017, of the eighteen management staff, sixteen (88.8 per cent) were male and only two (11.2 per cent) were female. In 2018, there were nineteen management staff, eighteen of whom (94.7 per cent) were male. In 2019, the total number of the management team increased to twenty, of which seventeen (85 per cent) were male and three (15 per cent) female. With regard to the gender composition of deans of college, there was no female dean, except in 2015 when there was one (25 per cent), compared with three males (75 per cent). The highest number of female professors was

Table 5.1: Gender Composition of University Leadership at the University of Ibadan, 2013–2017

	2013		2014		2015		2016		2017	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Executive management	5 (83%)	1 (17%)	5 (100%)	0 (0%)	5 (83%)	1 (17%)	4 (67%)	2 (33%)	5 (71%)	2 (29%)
Deans of faculties	13 (87%)	2 (13%)	14 (93%)	1 (7%)	13 (86%)	2 (14%)	14 (88%)	2 (12%)	15 (88%)	2 (12%)
Directors of institutes	13 (76%)	4 (24%)	13 (62%)	8 (38%)	15 (65%)	8 (35%)	12 (63%)	7 (37%)	14 (67%)	7 (33%)
Professors	194 (86%)	32 (14%)	224 (87%)	33 (13%)	293 (86%)	49 (14%)	321 (84%)	61 (16%)	336 (84%)	66 (16%)
Ag. heads of dept.	53 (78%)	15 (22%)	41 (71%)	17 (29%)	22 (52%)	20 (48%)	24 (62%)	15 (38%)	21 (53%)	18 (47%)
Secretariat	5 (83%)	1 (17%)	11 (65%)	6 (35%)	11 (69%)	5 (31%)	10 (67%)	5 (33%)	10 (63%)	6 (37%)
TOTAL	283	55	428	100	471	117	491	122	513	138

Source: Report of Gender Policy Audit Committee, August 2017

Table 5.2: Gender Composition of University Leadership at Covenant University, 2013–2019

	2013		2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Management	17 (94.4%)	1 (5.6%)	17 (94.4%)	1 (5.6%)	17 (94.4%)	1 (5.6%)	17 (94.4%)	1 (5.6%)	16 (88.8%)	2 (11.2%)	18 (94.7%)	1 (5.3%)	17 (85%)	3 (15%)
Deans of college	2 (100%)	0 (-)	2 (100%)	0 (-)	3 (75%)	1 (25%)	4 (100%)	0 (-)	4 (100%)	0 (-)	4 (100%)	0 (-)	4 (100%)	0 (-)
Professor	31 (91.2%)	3 (8.8%)	32 (91.4%)	3 (8.6%)	34 (87.2%)	5 (12.8%)	34 (87.2%)	5 (12.8%)	83 (90.2%)	9 (9.8%)	63 (90%)	7 (10%)	71 (93.4%)	5 (6.6%)
Heads of department	19 (95%)	1 (5%)	20 (95.2%)	1 (4.8%)	20 (95.2%)	1 (4.8%)	20 (91%)	2 (9%)	18 (82%)	4 (18%)	18 (78.2%)	5 (21.8%)	16 (69.6%)	7 (30.4%)
TOTAL	69	5	71	5	74	8	75	7	121	15	103	13	108	15

Source: HR Department Covenant University July 2019

recorded in 2017, when there were nine (9.8 per cent) women out of ninety-two professors in the university. The highest number of female heads of departments was recorded in 2019 with seven (30.4 per cent) out of twenty-three. Just as the acclaimed low representation of women in senior HE leadership is validated in the management and professorial cadres of Covenant University, the heavy presence of women at middle level is evident at both institutions.

The quotas and gender parity legislation in HE, including university gender policies, have helped to improve women's participation in HE leadership, yet little energy is being spent to maximise these opportunities. This could be due to how leadership spaces for women remain in the 'ivory basements' (Eveline 2004), or the 'velvet ghettos' of communication, finance and human resource management (Guillaume and Pochic 2009). One may inquire to what end women have gained space in HE leadership This question raises the need to scrutinise the kinds of leadership roles accorded to women. Inferences drawn from the gathered data show that university management is quick to place women in welfare roles, including chairing university convocation committees, as members of fund-raising committees, as deputy vice-chancellor with a portfolio of special duties, as representatives of the vice-chancellor at public functions, and, at worst, as occupants of specific offices to justify the institution's gender sensitivity. This is corroborated in the literature, establishing the potential for backlash even when gender equity initiatives sometimes connote a change in benefit schemes (Morley et al. 2005).

Women are often placed in leadership based on their oratorical prowess, smart and beautiful appearance, among other soft skills, compared with their male counterparts who gain leadership spaces based on their assertiveness, firmness and leadership track record. Commonly passed comments, such as 'she is beautiful and attractive, so she should be on the vice-chancellor's team to build goodwill' (personal communication with a female academic at the level of acting head of department), reduce women's intellectual investments and commitment to higher education to insignificance.

A scholar at the University of Ibadan shared a version of events, being female in the academia:

> Being female in any field is itself a mixture of fun and challenges. Having spent the first ten years of my career life in advertising and media consultancy, I have had a fair share of honour, trust, goal-setting and goal-getting despite the ever-demanding nature of the work. A major problem encountered here is a continual pressure to meet deadlines, increase clientele and ultimately increase company's annual turnover. Caught between work pressures and

> completing a PhD programme, my husband advised that I switch to the academia; my primary calling, hoping to provide ample time for family and other personal things, however I discovered that much is expected of a young academic; particularly, the female. My first couple of months as an assistant lecturer was adventurous as colleagues wondered how a 'young and beautiful' woman would survive the prevalent intellectual and sexual harassments.

That this respondent claims that academia was her primary calling shows that she had been trapped on another career path due to her inability to secure a job in an academic institution. Yet, one may deduce from the above, that the respondent was oblivious to a sexualised and hostile work environment before crossing into academia. She proceeded to share her leadership experience as follows:

> A woman in the academia is faced with two major challenges: that of asserting her scholarship before students and affirming her competence amidst colleagues, particularly the male counterparts. Rising through the ranks requires a woman's decision to either pass a 'short-cut' or get there through hard work and high self-dignity. My most exciting experience was when I was appointed as acting head of department in a department staffed with only three female academics out of sixteen. I was the most senior of the women, though young and inexperienced in such administrative duties. It was obvious that my failure was expected right from outset. Interestingly, by standards including leadership style, team-building, human relations, staff welfare, financial uprightness and public relations, I succeeded in recording the most successful term in the history of that department. This is a rare version of event, seeing that women in academia are faced with series of resistance (domestic, societal, religious, personal and so on) right from the outset of their career. However, one must not join the crowd in positing that academia is a slippery terrain for women. In fact, it is one of several careers that provide a good platform for women to excel, increase their levels of resilience on the job, and also improve their commitment to functioning well within teaching, research and community service, which are the cardinal points in academia.

Another scholar, from Covenant University, expressed that working in a private university was very similar to experiences in public universities, except for a few marked differences. She asserted that:

> Appointment to leadership positions in private universities do not always follow the procedures of public universities. Leadership roles are mostly need-based and focused on availability. Oftentimes, there are more women at the middle-level of departments who are compelled to take on offices of the acting HOD, sub-dean, post graduate coordinators and directors of centres. This is largely so as most professors who could have held such offices are retirees from public universities and appointed to play advisory and mentoring roles.

It worth noting that the title 'acting' seeks to mark middle-level career staff in leadership as not possessing full authority, as would have been in the case of 'substantive' office-holders.

Of her leadership experience, she noted:

> I regard the leadership exposures given to women at middle-level as preparatory to senior-level leadership. However, chances are slim that most women can make it to the top; first because their male counterparts are more forceful with taking those spaces and second, because the system is often reluctant to remove a performing female leader from the middle-level leadership unless she is strongly needed at the senior level.

Often, organisations are compelled by systems (mostly based on sociocultural proclivity) to perceive women more as managers and maintainers than transformational leaders. A prevailing notion that women are better left where they are rather than engaging them with more challenging tasks reinforces role and spatial entrapment and, ultimately, the culture of retaining women in middle-level leadership.

As much as the literature has established systemic barriers that entrap women in HE leadership (Tucker 1993; Montez, Wolverton and Gmelch 2003; Odejide 2007), the selected experiences shared raise the need to highlight key issues identified by the respondents as challenges to women at middle-level HE leadership from the questionnaire. Wenneras and Wold (1997) have earlier identified that gender bias exists in judgements of excellence, even by peers. This could be probed further by engaging with findings that connect with the barriers of leadership that are possibly created and fostered by women themselves in HE.

Key Issues of Middle-Level Female Academics in HE Leadership from Selected Nigerian Universities

Feminist Brain Drain

The term 'brain drain' refers to the international transfer of human capital resources, and it applies mainly to the migration of highly educated individuals from developing to developed countries (Gibson and McKenzie 201; Docquier 2014). One is quick to think of brain drain within the context of human capital flights, particularly of highly skilled labour into developed countries. However, when highly skilled labour diverts their skills and energies into other areas for the sake of survival, a new sort of brain drain, without emigration, ensues. This may be called 'continental brain drain'. Mama (2005: 99) discusses how 'scholars who remained on the continent have had their brains drained in other ways – into various entrepreneurial

and consultancy activities that soon became more essential to their survival than their professional employment as highly trained academics'. While brain drain may not necessarily be gendered, this work recognises women's transfer of intellectual skills into non-intellectual but purportedly profitable activities for survival as 'feminist brain drain'.

Women in academia are largely faced with the dilemma of introducing business or entrepreneurial interest into their services on campus in order to survive financially. Some establish business centres, cafeterias and other social services, which reinforces the perception of female academics as half-hearted or not fully fledged academics. This in turn takes its toll on the kinds of leadership roles women are offered and their performance/output in such offices. Of the eight middle-level female academics interviewed from the two institutions of focus, six (75 per cent) agreed that female academics themselves have helped to propagate and perpetuate the feminist brain drain (in terms of diverting their intellectual energies to non-intellectual activities within campuses as a norm). They agreed that feminist brain drain entraps women in middle-level HE leadership, as they are often too distracted to acquire the prerequisites for top leadership positions. The other two academics interviewed (25 per cent) were of the view that scholarship should not discount entrepreneurship. Mid-level female academics are neck-deep in administrative and academic duties yet may not earn enough to sustain themselves in Nigeria. This was corroborated by the questionnaire data, which validated the social constructions of women's multiple roles (Nkomo and Ngambi 2009) and multi-tasking skills while still entrapped within academic and HE leadership roles. However, they all agreed that it would be more profitable to take on full-time research and administration if the system provided adequately for staff welfare both on the job and on retirement.

Queen Bee Syndrome

The term 'queen bee' refers to women in high positions who have achieved their professional goals in male-dominated organisations by distancing themselves from other women, and at the same time express behaviour that leads to gender stereotyping (Sobczak 2018: 54).Queen bee syndrome is suspected when the few women in senior-level leadership define their personalities in masculine terms, disparage the proficiency of their female colleagues, and fail to support other women moving into senior leadership.

On one hand, five of the eight interviewees agreed that most middle-level women in HE leadership manifest queen bee attributes as soon as they take office, due to their perceived need to build respect from

other people and establish that they are one step ahead of their female counterparts. One of the respondents stated: 'I noticed that I have lost a friend and confidant the moment she became the Acting Dean of Faculty. She simply switched me off so as to earn herself some respect. She even advised that her new role is not for people like me, whatever that meant!'. This tactic is seen as a means of survival in a male-constructed and male-dominated space.

On the other hand, the remaining three interviewees were of the view that women's personality traits contribute significantly to whether they will display queen bee attributes or not. One of the respondents expressed that:

> not all women display queen bee attributes. For instance, when my mentor became Acting Head of Department, she supported her colleagues to scale hurdles they have all experienced as women in the department. I also know a colleague who was well known for her defence of fellow female colleagues even at management meetings; these are the best set among women and they still exist.

Studies have shown that women are more often forced into the queen bee syndrome when the work environment is highly masculinised, stereotypical and gender discriminatory (David 2015; Nkomo and Ngambi 2009), implying that queen bee syndrome is a by-product of systemic violence embedded in work environments. From this, one may surmise that queen bee behaviour is not consciously adopted by women; rather, the system is structured to make women obstruct each other such that they are systemically compelled to reinforce it. All the interviewees agreed with the systemic creation argument; the questionnaire data shows that they equally agreed that queen bee syndrome strains senior–junior relations at the workplace and dovetails with the mentorship crises that bedevil women in HE leadership.

Feminist Crab Syndrome

Closely linked with the queen bee syndrome is the crab syndrome. It is drawn from the observed behaviour of crabs, which would rather frustrate than support efforts by another crab to escape when trapped within a space. Crab syndrome in the workplace propels colleagues to consciously disparage one another's efforts, refusing to support, enhance or promote commendable acts or activities of others at work. The crab syndrome in the workplace promotes sycophancy and reduces group efforts to futility. It is most often the culprit when certain departments become redundant within institutions (Morley 1999).

Feminist crab syndrome manifests in two ways: first, when female colleagues act or don't act, to prevent one another from being recognised or considered for promotion; second, when women at lower echelons of leadership engage in activities to undermine, disregard and disparage their female counterparts in senior leadership roles. Responding to the question: 'Do women support one another?', thirty-two (64 per cent) of the respondents strongly agreed that women do not support one another as they should. Thirteen (26 per cent) argued that the question of support would not arise if there were no women in the organisation, and the remaining five (10 per cent) were of the view that women would support women if only the system permitted them to.

Reckoning that there are men who sabotage other men, the uniqueness of women sabotaging one another lies in the consciousness that there is limited space for women within academic leadership and since this does not give room for women to learn on the job, these spaces should be reserved only for the best of women. Sadly, this mindset blinds women to the 'best' of them, since by sabotaging one another they risk losing the few spaces in senior-level leadership to their male counterparts.

One of the interviewees within a public university context noted that:

> University systems, particularly the larger ones, thrive on referrals. One must enjoy favourable recommendations from the departmental level to rise into leadership. Women do not sufficiently enjoy such referrals from middle-level leadership to senior HE leadership. Several forces, including people of her gender, contribute largely to this, and when you are not promoted as a viable brand by people of your kind, who else will?

By this, she refers to the 'old boys' network', a replica of which is gaining ground among women.

Another interviewee speaking from the private university experience observed that:

> The private university systems are somewhat different. Since ownership permits management to take certain decisions without recourse to committee systems, women may be assigned leadership roles as a divide-and-rule tactic aimed at entrapping staff within certain cadres for a period of time. It could also be used to validate women's incompetence in office which is more often than not reinforced by unsuspecting fellow women. For me, leadership at middle-level higher education is a trap within which your female colleagues may also help you to stay so that the burden of leadership does not fall upon them so soon.

In whatever manifestation, feminist crab syndrome remains a burden for women in HE leadership.

Avenger Syndrome

Women at middle-level career on campus often embrace leadership roles to create and preserve their self-respect. In this study, twenty-five (50 per cent) of the respondents agreed that most middle-level female academics take leadership roles to gain influence and wield power, while the rest thought middle-level female academics are forced into leadership roles. However, both groups agreed that most women acquire more adversaries at this stage due to their leadership styles, stern policies and sometimes awkward practices. Also, twenty-nine (58 per cent) of the respondents agreed with the prevalence of avenger syndrome among female middle-level academics, while twenty-one (42 per cent) posited that both men and women exhibit avenger syndrome traits in HE leadership.

One of the interviewees expressed issues on the avenger syndrome as follows:

> I have watched middle-level female academics falter in leadership. Very few women make it to the top, especially in Nigeria's challenging higher education environment, where cultural and religious biases militate against females in leadership. Most women lose out in senior leadership positions because they lost the confidence of those who would either vote them in or recommend them for such offices while at their mid-level leadership. We must however note that not all women are vengeful in the negative sense of it. For instance, when a female in HE leadership refuses to renew a negligent colleagues' membership of a committee (which is a positive move for institutional development) she is still accused of the avenger syndrome.

The study has established how middle-level female academics are burdened with leadership roles within the middle-level cadre (spatial entrapment) such that they are ensnared by such roles (role entrapment). Having highlighted the barriers of middle-level female academics from the selected Nigerian institutions of this study, what may be done to address the identified barriers?

Scholars have variously suggested the provision of special programmes for women, institutional and government support, rules and attitudinal change, enactment of gender policy in HE leadership, reviews of appointment and promotion procedures, among other solutions (Dines 1993; Morley 2012). However, this study takes a different path. To tackle the challenges of middle-level career women in HE leadership, women in academia must recognise the need for co-operative and supportive relationships within a system that has been structured to either stifle their efforts or retain them in the most convenient spot (middle-level cadre), as affirmed by David. Contradictory trends exist both in HE and in developing economies, such that '… the effects of neo-liberalism and managerialism have been to confine women to relatively limited roles, and not the most senior leadership positions' (David 2015: 23).

Having identified intra-feminist barriers in middle-level HE leadership, this study suggests symbiotic interactionism,[2] a model for intra-feminist co-operation founded on the principle of mutually shared values and strategies to address societal challenges that reinforce or ignore the plights of women. It prescribes a blend of two major concepts: symbiosis (an ecology-based concept), and interactionism (a sociological-cum-communication concept). Symbiosis in this study refers to intraspecies relationships, which are obligatory in nature, to foster interdependence amongst women (Omotoso 2014). In this context, symbiotic interactionism suggests partnership and support, by shrinking the top-bottom boundaries among women in HE leadership. It recognises social processes as products of human relations and prioritises the functions (not regarding any as trivial) of all players in processes of achieving predefined objectives (Omotoso 2020).

In whatever form, symbiotic interactionism not permit predation; rather, it promotes a frame of mind that women need each other to survive and overcome all forms of entrapment. Since men are equally caught in the web of competing for office with women, one may not expect them to support women's appointment into senior HE leadership or aid them in office.

The symbiotic interactionism model is exemplified at the Women's Research and Documentation Centre (WORDOC), University of Ibadan, where studies have shown a steady growth of women into HE leadership through conscious efforts based on co-operativism, peer mentoring and feminist solidarity, to increase women's representation and women's progression to senior management (Oyelude and Omotoso 2019). Although not much has been achieved in numerical terms, the pace of women's movement studied over the last thirty years of the Centre affirms the viability of symbiotic interactionism as a plausible model to combat intra-feminist barriers in HE leadership.

Conclusion

This study commenced by providing a background of higher education in West Africa. Reckoning with certain unfriendly factors, including government interference in HE leadership and management, the paper agrees with existing scholarship that the challenges that face HE in West Africa are more political than educational. The paper has specifically focused on middle-level female academics in HE leadership, noting prevalent patriarchal issues that militate against female middle-level academics' upward movement into senior leadership positions. Among other factors, the paper has presented arguments to affirm the presence of intra-feminist issues that further contribute to hold women back and the need for them to be critically addressed.

In this work, theories of role entrapment and spatial entrapment were expanded beyond conventional descriptions. Role entrapment, previously used to determine positions that minorities may and may not assume, was here introduced into a gendered discourse of HE leadership and how women get trapped within certain roles, performing the same/similar tasks over a period, thus hindering their career progress. In the same vein, spatial entrapment, which was developed to discuss geography-related workplace issues, was expanded in this article to cover arguments connecting with gender space and place-making in HE leadership. Both theories ascertained the burdens of middle-level female academics in two selected Nigerian institutions: University of Ibadan (public) and Covenant University (private). Highlighting that it is dangerous to uncritically posit that HE leadership is a slippery terrain for women, when general issues are not addressed and intra-feminist issues are swept under the carpet, the findings from both institutions show that women at middle-level HE leadership battle against feminist brain drain, queen bee syndrome and avenger syndrome in their various forms. Having noted the scholarship gap that has under-theorised intra-feminist factors that contribute to the entrapment of women at middle-level HE leadership, there is an urgent task for further research into areas of female mentorship and succession planning in HE leadership. This also relies on the urgency of HE policies to guarantee principles and processes that stipulate a minimum and maximum period within which middle-level leaders are expected to move into senior-level leadership.

By suggesting that symbiotic interactionism will address the challenges of intra-feminist issues that discourage women's upward movement in HE leadership, the work establishes the need for female academics to join forces in abhorring popular labels such as 'beautiful', 'fashionable', 'gorgeous', which are devoid of conscious acknowledgement of women's intellectual prowess and administrative capacity, in order to raise and retain women of substance and integrity in HE leadership. Overall, policies and practices in HE leadership must ensure that the internal workings of institutions support career progress without fear or favour, since academia is a platform to provide leadership and mentorship for potential leaders in other spheres.

Notes

1. Not all professors are in leadership positions.
2. Symbiotic interactionism as discussed by Omotoso, 2020, has been found to be relevant in combating various intra-feminist issues in discourses on leadership, governance and co-operativism.

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