

# THE STATE OF WOMEN LEADING REPORT



Unlocking  
the potential  
of female  
leadership  
in tertiary  
education





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**FAWE** Forum for African Women Educationalists  
Forum des éducatrices africaines



# Unlocking the potential of female leadership in tertiary education

**W**omen must have more leadership opportunities in sub-Saharan Africa to improve society for us all. Whilst this is not unique to education, academia can set the bar.

Universities and colleges are places where women can gain leadership skills and roles:

- **Scholarships** can develop students and educators into leaders.
- **Mentoring** and networks can unlock the power of female leadership.
- **Female role models** can inspire new generations of young people to pursue leadership.

There is a lack of evidence about the role of universities and colleges in sub-Saharan Africa in equipping women with leadership opportunities.

To start to fill this gap, Education Sub-Saharan Africa (ESSA), through its Women Leading project, is bringing attention to the situation for women in sub-Saharan Africa and using data and evidence to improve practices within universities and colleges to support women. This includes both female academics seeking leadership roles in universities and colleges, and female students for whom leadership skills will be a critical factor in their success as they transition into work.

As part of our Women Leading project, we led a research phase which has included a desktop review, interviews with women, and a survey with over 400 of female faculty, students and early career graduates. The results presented in this report are largely based on the survey that was rolled out from November 2020 to February 2021.

This research aims to develop a broad understanding of the state of play, including the barriers preventing more women transitioning into leadership and existing solutions.

At ESSA, we aim to improve education in sub-Saharan Africa so that young people achieve their ambitions and strengthen society. We support university and college leaders, employers, policymakers, and young people to turn evidence into practical solutions and maximise resources. By working together, we improve education policies and delivery. Women (and other under-represented groups) are our priority. We want to contribute to unlocking the potential of female leaders, in and through education, to ensure a better future for all.

We hope you find this report useful for your work. We hope current and aspiring female leaders find this report useful for your own leadership journeys. If you would like to share your ideas, skills, or partner more formally with us, please do get in touch: [info@essa-africa.org](mailto:info@essa-africa.org)

**Dr Jennifer N. Udeh**  
Head of Programmes and Partnerships, ESSA





# THANK YOU!



FAWE Forum for African Women Educationalists  
Forum des éducatrices africaines



Our research brings together insights from expert organisations and networks including:

**Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM)**

**All African Students Union (AASU)**

**Forum of African Women Educationalists (FAWE)**

**Inter-University Council of East Africa (IUCEA)**

**Mawazo Institute**

**African Union Youth Council**

We would like to thank the female leaders from sub-Saharan Africa who took part in our interview series sharing their leadership journeys and expert advice:

**Dr. Aishwarya Tiku**, Vice President Education at the University of the West of Scotland

**Dr. Almaz Negash**, Founder of the African Diaspora Network

**Ms. Ama Duncan**, Founder of The Fabulous Woman Network

**Ms. Faith Kaoma**, Founder and COO of women's rights charity Copper Rose in Zambia

**Ms. Martha Muhwezi**, Executive Director of the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE)

**Ms. Mary Ojwang**, Founding Member of the Women Students Mentorship Association (WOSWA) in Kenya

**Ms. One Pusumane**, PhD Student from Botswana

**Prof. Ruth Mubanga**, Chancellor at University of Africa

**Dr. Zibah Nwako**, Founder of AFFIRM Consulting and a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Bristol

**Prof. Mary Okwakol**, Chair of Forum for African Women Vice Chancellors

**Ms. Nodumo Dhamini**, Director of ICT, Association of African Universities

**Ms. Petriider Paul**, African Union Youth Advisory Council Tanzania; OYW Ambassador

Lastly, a special thank you to **all of the female faculty, students and early career graduates** who took part in our survey. We hope you find this report useful for your own leadership development.

# DEFINITION OF **LEADERSHIP**

**T**he definition of leadership has evolved over time varying from one perspective to another. For the sake of this report, we will look at the definition first from a scholarly perspective as evidenced through literature and, and then from the perspective of individual women.

## Leadership as defined by scholars

The definition of leadership varies from one researcher to another.

***"The process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives,"*** Yukl, G. (2006).

***"A process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal."*** (Northouse 2010).

***'An act of influence to achieve a certain goal'*** (Silva 2016)

***'The act of motivating and inspiring a group of people to realise a shared goal/objective'.*** (Malik and Azmat, 2019)

In general, these definitions suggest that leadership is a process, involves influencing others and results in the attainment of a specific goal. Defining leadership as a process implies that leadership is a transactional exchange that happens between leaders and their followers. Recognising leadership as a process also implies that leadership can be learned and developed.

## What does leadership mean to women?

The women we interviewed shared with us, amongst other things, their perspectives on leadership.

Aishwarya Tiku, Doctor of Business Administration student and Vice President Education at the University of the West of Scotland's Student Union says, ***"leadership is about being able to use one's skills, abilities, passion and determination, to be able to make a change, regardless of their background and limitations."***

Martha Muhwezi, Executive Director of the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) thinks ***"leadership is providing guidance which could be at the institutional level, varying from one institution to another."***

Ama Duncan, Founder of The Fabulous Woman Network believes ***"a good leader is first able to lead themselves to make the right choices in the interests of the people he or she is serving and influencing them to do same."***





## Leadership from the organisational perspective

The women surveyed further defined leadership from an organisations perspective as:

***“Leadership isn’t limited to being CEO (Chief Executive Officer) or a company executive; leadership is rather nurtured in the home right from childhood.”***

***“There is also visionary leadership in terms of ensuring the organisation is spearheaded in a manner to achieve its goals, mission and vision.”*** Martha Muhwezi, Executive Director of the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE).

These definitions lean towards a view that women view leadership as the ability to influence rather than solely a position. This view may have implications on a woman’s leadership development journey.

The ESSA survey reveals that 82.29% of women perceive leadership as the process of influencing a group of people towards a common goal. Approximately 15% of the women perceive leadership as the effective control of the delivery of a specific objective and only 2% perceive leadership as a senior position within an organization.

Leadership refers to the effective control of the delivery of specific objective.

Leadership refers to a senior position within an organisation.

Leadership refers to the process of influencing a group of people towards a common goal.



Women in Leadership  
in SSA

The World Economic Forum in 2020 reported that sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) was making considerable progress as far as women's participation at all levels was concerned. UNESCO (2017) believe this trend is driven by positive attitudes toward girls' education and deliberate policies in favour of women. This, however, does not change the fact that, African women are still underrepresented in higher management positions in companies, in politics, and universities and colleges (McKinsey, 2019). Despite the odds, women continue to pursue leadership roles. Being a leader is a professional goal that is attainable for women.

# WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP JOURNEY

Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Agree



In 2015, a KPMG report revealed that 64% of women aspired to be a senior leader of a company or organisation in the future and 56% of women aspired to be on the board of a company or organisation. Results from the ESSA survey support this point and provide further evidence of current leadership aspirations, performance, and satisfaction amongst women.

Rollled out from 25th of November 2020-15th of February 2021, the survey targeting female students, faculty member, early and mid-career professionals, administrators, and managers from within and outside the tertiary education sector had as objectives to:

- Enable ESSA to get a complete picture of the barriers women in SSA faced in accessing leadership positions within tertiary education.
- Uncover opportunities at university/college and when transitioning into work.
- Understand the status of female leadership policies and practices at universities and colleges in the region.

- Identify the key skills these women need to access leadership.
- Understand successful models from within and outside the education sector including mentorship, networking, institutional policies, and leadership programmes.

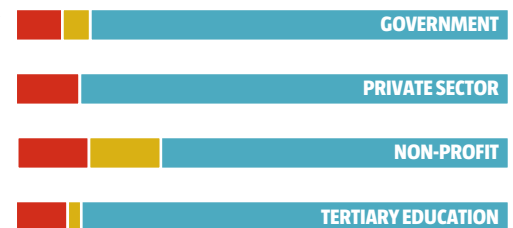
The survey reveals that 89% of women aspire to be leaders, 85% of the respondents are developing to be leaders and 91% have the ability and the right mind set to seek out/access leadership opportunities. The survey further reveals that 46% of women are dissatisfied with their current level of leadership development. 14% of women surveyed were neither satisfied or dissatisfied and 40% are satisfied with their current development.

This dissatisfaction with current levels of leadership development could be the driving force that explains the high percentage of women aspiring and developing to be leaders. With more women aspiring to become leaders and developing their abilities to achieve this objective, there is greater hope of achieving gender parity in leadership in the near future.

## Women's leadership ambitions

### Leadership aspirations

Amongst the women surveyed that are working in government institutions, 86% aspire to become leaders. Within universities and colleges, 86% aspire to become leaders. In the private sector, 88% aspire to become leaders and in the non-profit sector, 73% aspire to be leaders.





### Leadership Development

From the results of ESSA's survey, 81% of respondents working in government are developing their abilities to become leaders. The figure was similar for women in universities and colleges (82%) and in the private sector (82%). In the non-profit sector, 80% are developing to be leaders. It is evident that women at all levels and in all sectors of society are on a leadership development journey and are willing, able and determined to develop their leadership abilities.



### Leadership capability and mindset

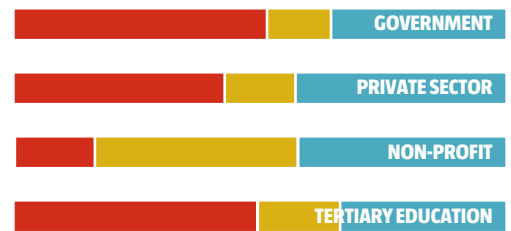
Overcoming barriers related to mindset can be key to closing the gender inequality gap in leadership. The results of our survey provided evidence that the majority of women believe that they do have the ability and the right mindset to seek out/access leadership positions. 92% of women within the tertiary education sector asserted to this. This figure is comparable across other sectors, with 93% in both the non-profit and government sectors. The number was slightly lower in the private sector at 89%.



■ Disagree ■ Neither Agree nor Disagree ■ Agree

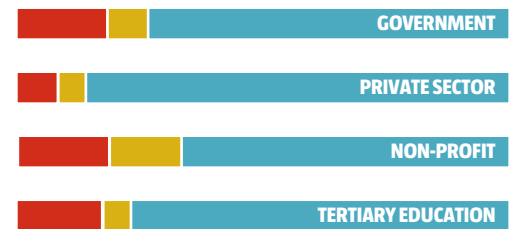
### Level of satisfaction with current leadership development

According to the results of ESSA's survey, 49% of respondents in the public sector and 46% and 47% within universities were not satisfied with the current level of leadership while 39% were satisfied. Considering the respondents in the private sector, 45% indicated that they were satisfied with their current level of leadership, while 40% were not. In the non-profit sector, only 14% of the respondents were dissatisfied with the current level of leadership while 43% were satisfied and 43% were indifferent about the current state of leadership.



### Skills to retain leadership positions

The survey revealed that women studying and working in universities and colleges were 77% more likely to retain current leadership positions, 75% in the public sector indicated same. In the private sector, 89% affirmed they had the ability and skills to retain and grow in their current leadership position while in the non-profit sector, the number was slightly lower at 67%.



## SPOTLIGHT ON UNIVERSITY AND COLLEGE EDUCATION

Women in universities and colleges have the ability and mindset to seek out and access leadership opportunities. Women within leadership positions have the skills to retain their position and / or develop further. However, there are still significant levels of dissatisfaction with regards to leadership development.

Aspiring to develop as a leader.

**86% of women are aspiring to develop as a leader**

Developing as a leader.

**82% of women are on a journey, developing as a leader**

Have the right mindset to seek out and access leadership.

**92% of women believe they have the ability and right mindset to seek out and access leadership opportunities.**

Satisfied with current leadership development.

**47% of women are not satisfied with their current leadership development.**

Have the ability and skills to retain and/grow.

**77% of women believe they have the ability and skills to retain and/or grow in their leadership position**

# Barriers to female leadership

**A** lot of progress has been made towards involving women in leadership positions at all levels of society from the corporate world to the education sector. However, this progress has not trickled down into higher female representation in positions of power. In this section, we will be looking at 9 key barriers to female leadership in SSA from the results of our survey on female leadership and other related literature on the subject. These barriers include factors such as gender stereotypes, workplace bias, networking and mentorship.

## 9 barriers to female leadership development

### 1. Socio-cultural expectations

One of the greatest barriers to women holding leadership positions is related to societal expectations and cultural beliefs. Women in most parts of the continent are viewed to have a principle role taking care of the home and attending to family duties. Consequently, young girls are encouraged from a tender age to be family oriented and find a suitable husband once the time is right. Raised to view men as the head of the family and the leader in many dimensions, young girls and women are less likely to seek a position which seems to interfere with societal views on the subject for fear of being viewed badly by their peers.

For instance, when asked what she felt was a barrier to female leadership in Zambia during an interview with ESSA, Ruth Mubanga, Zambia's first female University Chancellor, made the following comments:

"One major challenge I would say affects women is confidence. I have had opportunities during my time at the Ministry of Education where I recommended positions to some women but they felt they were incapable so turned them down. Confidence is one of the biggest obstacles which we need to address so women can confidently feel

and say they can lead."

From the first female biology lecturer to the first female chancellor, Ruth speaks about her leadership journey:

"I started as a science teacher in an all-girls school, then moved to a Teacher Training College as a lecturer in the Sciences. I rose in ranks to become an Inspector of schools, the Principal at Nkrumah College of Education Zambia, and later, the Director of Teacher Education and Specialised Services Ministry of Education. After retirement, I was engaged at the University of Africa as an advisor. In 2017, I was appointed as the Chancellor of the University of Africa. At the end of 2018, the university had a crisis at a point which led the Vice-Chancellor to resign. Guess what? I was asked to step in as the acting Vice-Chancellor.

**"Confidence is one of the biggest obstacles which we need to address so women can confidently feel and say they can lead"**

Honestly, it has been a challenging yet exciting experience. As the first female science Lecturer at the Nkrumah College, there was no one to look up to. I was the pioneer so both students and teachers looked up to me as a role model. As a Principal, there was a lot of resistance from people who did not think I could deliver in my position or was qualified enough. For me that meant working extra hard to show people I had the qualities and capacities to deliver in my position.

There is no doubt that socio-cultural beliefs and expectations have greatly affected women's involvement in leadership at all levels. Even if these positions were available, women's opportunities to access them remains relatively low. Only a minority of women who grew into a different mindset, or

could access more opportunities, believe it is possible and therefore, they work towards attending the goal of leading either politically, economically, socially or otherwise."

### 2. Limited access to mentorship opportunities

Mentorship can provide guidance, motivation, emotional support and role modelling for the individual being mentored (the mentee). The absence of mentoring can have a great impact on an individual's professional development, including leadership development.

Women typically have access to mentors for guidance but lack adequate sponsors who advocate for their promotion, introduce them to key stakeholders and give them exposure to senior roles.

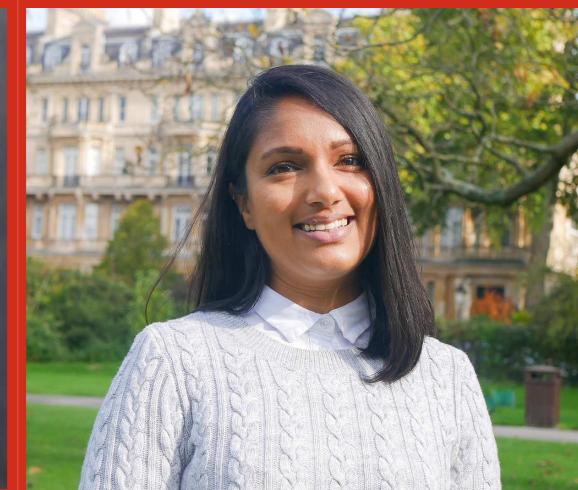
In universities and colleges, mentorship, networking, role modelling and sponsorship are viewed as powerful interventions that assist, support and guide young academics (especially females) in their career trajectory. Abugre and Kpinpuo (2017) and Chitsamatanga et al. (2018) suggest that young academics who undergo mentoring experience higher levels of job satisfaction, self-efficacy and career growth as compared to non-mentored academics. However, evidence suggests that women academics lack influential mentors (Madsen, 2008; Wolverson and Gmelch, 2002).

### 3. Limited networking opportunities

Access to networks is essential for leadership development. Besides the capacity building and career development benefits networking provides, a study by the African Development Bank revealed that most Board appointments in the corporate sector continue to be made in an informal process, based on the proverbial "old-boy" networks, fed by family, school, and business relations (AfDB, 2015). The "old-boy" network affords inside information, facilitates advancement, and provides a social and support network to its members. Exclusion from influential mentorship and networks does not only affect women's career development but also their leadership prospects.

### 4. Unconscious workplace bias

Existing research highlights the entrenched and male-dominated nature of institutions in SSA (Guramatunhu-Madiwa, 2010; Idahosa, 2019; Mama, 2009; AAS, 2020; Fische et. al., 2020). Most institutions in SSA are patriarchal in nature and consequently gender issues are not at the forefront of conversations. This makes it difficult for women to make it into and succeed in leadership positions. Although there has been progress in getting women into the top leadership positions, the fact remains that only about 6% of CEOs and 22% of



executive committee members are women and about 25% of Board members are women.

In most SSA countries, established recruitment, promotion and appointment processes lack transparency and are susceptible to gender bias (Chitsamatanga and Rembe 2019). Despite appearing to be gender-neutral, these policies work against the advancement of women (Adu-Oppong & Kendie, 2018; Amakye, 2019; Booyesen & Nkomo, 2010). This is particularly notable in university and college education where academic publication is a precondition for academic promotion and advancement (Chitsamatanga & Rembe, 2019; Mama, 2009; Nafukho et al., 2019). The 'publish or perish' principle of universities may not be as challenging for men as it is for women, who often have additional family responsibilities.

### 5. Unhealthy work and family balance

The stress of balancing work and family responsibilities presents a major constraint on women advancing into senior leadership roles. Work-life balance was very difficult for women with young children, especially when they had to try to balance their role as the primary caregiver with additional responsibility in their workplaces (Musfiqur et al. 2018; Rich et al. 2016). Within universities and colleges, research plays a critical role in career progression. However, research can also prevent women accessing leadership positions since academic work is dependent on administration, teaching and research which women often struggle to keep up with because of family responsibilities.

### 6. Marginalisation, tokenism, and isolation of women in leadership positions

Women leaders in SSA experience marginalisation, tokenism and isolation often in male-dominated organisations. Existing literature notes that, usually women who are the first to enter leadership positions are often isolated, hyper-visible and subject to gender stereotypes (Mabokela & Mlambo, 2017)

## ESSA SPOTLIGHT: TRANSITION TO WORK

ESSA is joining up employers with universities and colleges to implement evidence-based approaches aimed at helping young people transition into work.

In Ghana, it takes more than ten years for most graduates to secure decent jobs after leaving school. (ISSER of the University of Ghana, 2017). In Uganda, 79.5% of employed young people are undereducated for the job they are doing (ILO SWTS, 2014). There is a mis-match between what students are learning in university and the skills employers need. This is underpinned by a lack of data and evidence about what students do once they leave university or college.

There is an added under-representation of women in the workplace in sub-Saharan Africa, with women making up 43% of those who receive tertiary education but holding only 28% of formal sector jobs (McKinsey Global Institute, 2019).

ESSA has established a partnership with The Education Collaborative at Ashesi University in Ghana to support tertiary education institutions in SSA to develop effective careers service structures and industry engagement strategies.

ESSA is gathering knowledge and evidence of good practice from industry and education stakeholders.

This evidence will be used to support the co-design and implementation of a Career Services Department and measurement framework at The University of Cape Coast, Ghana (UCC) and further institutions in SSA.

**“As a principal, there was a lot of resistance from people who did not think I could deliver in my position or was qualified enough. For me that meant working extra hard to show people I have the qualities and capacities to deliver in my position.”**

In universities and colleges, isolations can also exist. Emerging female researchers and academics can feel isolated if they do not have colleagues who share their research interests and can provide mentoring and support.

### 7. Unhelpful working environment and policies

Organisational policies and facilities are typically attuned to male needs because the culture expects men to be the primary workers. For example, until the adoption of the new ILO (International Labour Organisation) convention on eliminating violence and sexual harassment at the workplace, workers relied on cumbersome legislative processes and interpretations to deal with cases of workplace violence and sexual harassment. McLaughlin et al. (2012) noted that in the past “a really large percentage of women quit their jobs” due to sexual harassment.

### 8. Barriers related to women’s mindset

Some women limit their own prospects by being reluctant to take risks, network with colleagues, and advocate for their own advancement. Many women see themselves as less qualified for key leadership positions and will often accept a more subservient role as a better position.



Herbst (2020) argued that women underrating themselves could be because of women often being advised to tone down interpersonal behaviour.

Ruth shared her opinion on mindset barriers to women's leadership, commenting that a key characteristic in Zambia was the fact that women were the main support system in their families and taking up a leadership role wasn't their priority.

They would prefer family or a less demanding role over a challenging leadership position or pursuing their education.

Ama Duncan, Founder of The Fabulous Women Network, also commented on the subject of mindset during her interview with ESSA:

***"I think the majority of the barriers had to do with my mindset. I battled with low self-esteem because all my life I thought I wasn't good enough. I did not feel qualified to lead and rally other women. Now I recognize that I have the support and resources needed to conquer this issue. The biggest thing that has worked will be the people who mentored and still mentor me. They used their own experiences to teach and coach me which was helpful."***

### **9. Discriminatory National Laws**

All African countries recognise the principle of non-discrimination in their constitutions. The African Union (AU) strategy for gender equality and women empowerment (2018-2028) aims to ensure gender equality in all spheres of life. However, several African countries still have laws that discriminate against women. In Cameroon, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Congo, the law gives husbands sole control over marital property, making it difficult for married women to obtain loans to finance business they may want to set up since these loans often require property as collateral. In Chad, Guinea-Bissau and Niger, married women need their husbands' permission to open a bank account. As a result, women's participation in leadership and the economy continues to be mediated in impor-

tant ways by their male counterparts (AfDB, 2015).

## The Greatest Barriers to Female Leadership

ESSA survey results reveal that the greatest barrier to women leadership across all sectors is socio-cultural expectations, as indicated by the majority of respondents (32%). This is followed by lack of mentorship opportunities (28%), lack of networking opportunities (22%) and gender stereotypes (20%).

In Universities and Colleges (tertiary education), the greatest barrier is socio-cultural expectations (33%), followed by lack of mentorship (29%), gender stereotypes (25%) and limited access to training and development (24%).

The survey also considered the Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields, similarly identifying the greatest barriers being socio-cultural barriers (29%), 27% for limited access to mentorship, 20% for limited access to networking opportunities, and 20.82% for gender stereotypes.

The table on the next page presents the barriers, which act as a deterrent to women pursuing leadership positions and help explain the lower representation of women in leadership positions.

## Barriers

	All women %	Women in Tertiary Education (%)	Women in STEM (%)
Cultural or social expectations	32	33	29
Lack of mentorship opportunities	29	29	28
Lack of networking opportunities	22	22	21
Gender stereotypes	20	25	21
Limited access to career guidance opportunities	18	13	19
Limited access to leadership training and development	17	24	16
Lack of opportunities for critical work experience and responsibility	17	13	20
Limited access to work/employment	13	6	16
Sexual harassment	14	9	17
Organisational policies do not favour women	11	10	11
Lack of confidence to lead	11	6	12
Lack of flexibility at the workplace/school	12	16	11
Opposition/resistance from male colleagues	11	12	11
Unfair promotional policies at the workplace	13	23	12
Public policies or services not conducive to women becoming leaders	8	6	9
Limited access to scholarship opportunities	10	11	8
Limited research training and publication support	9	12	10
Lack of leadership skills	9	12	11
Limited access to research funds	10	15	11
Unhealthy work (education)/life balance	9	23	7
Lack of role model	6	8	7
Limited access to ICT (Internet Communication Technology) equipment and infrastructure (internet)	5	4	5
Limited access to education	6	0	4

# The Impact of COVID-19 ON FEMALE LEADERSHIP

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected women at all levels of the society. The uncertain preventive and containment measures have brought disruptions that have had severe effects and posed unique challenges particularly to women and girls. In addition to the pre-existing social and systemic barriers to women's participation in leadership, it has amplified the obstacles that women face to meaningfully engage in decision-making particularly, as women are confronted with increased caregiving burdens.

On the other hand, the pandemic has presented new opportunities for women already in leadership, Windsor et. al (2020) states that the pandemic has strategically positioned women leaders. Results from the ESSA survey on the other hand reveal that, 47% of the respondents were affected negatively by the pandemic and 31% were affected positively while 22% of the respondents indicated that, their leadership development was not affected by the pandemic.

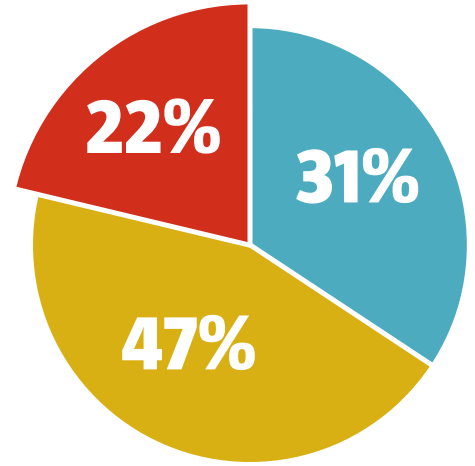
## Impact of COVID-19 on leadership training for women

According to the results of the ESSA survey, COVID-19 impacted women's involvement in leadership training with 79% of our respondents affirming they were negatively affected by the pandemic due to interruptions in training. Interestingly, 19% of the respondents indicated that the interruption of training had a positive effect on the leadership training. This could be because of training shifting from physical to online, hence affording women the time to participate.

## Impact of ill-health resulting from COVID-19 on leadership development

Given that COVID-19 is health related, 69% of the respondents indicated the ill-health brought about by the virus negatively affected their leadership skills. Surprisingly, 30% of the respondents indicated that ill-health had a positive effect on their leadership development. Perhaps this could be because of women being primary caregivers, innovators, community organisers, and some of the most exemplary and effective national leaders in combating the pandemic.

- Yes, Positively
- Yes, Negatively
- No



## Impact of COVID-19 on women's earning

The pandemic has resulted in salary cuts for workers especially in the private sector where companies have been greatly affected resulting to a reduction in number of working hours, layoffs and salary cuts. 75% of ESSA respondents attested to the fact that, these reductions affected women's leadership development negatively while 25% indicated it affected their leadership development positively. Existing evidence shows that women's employment may be less affected by downturns precisely because some married women increase their labour supply to compensate for unemployment.

## Impact of COVID-19 on the ability to network

With the world moving into lockdown because of the pandemic with key measures such as social distancing, physical meetups are greatly reduced globally with SSA not being an exception. This does not however apply same for everyone, especially those who moved their networking online. In fact, according to the results of ESSA's survey, 83% of respondents indicated that, their leadership development was negatively impacted by the pandemic due to limited opportunity to build new networks while 67% were able to build new networks online which had a positive impact on their leadership development.

## Impact of COVID-19 on learning and leadership development

COVID-19 resulted in teleworking for most people, giving everyone including women the chance to learn new skills online and improve their leadership abilities. This, however, did not apply same for everyone. The ESSA survey indicates that approximately 78% of respondents had the opportunity to learn new leadership skills, while 21% indicated that the increased opportunity to learn new leadership skills did not produce positive effects on their leadership development. Given the increased unpaid care burden due to the pandemic, women may also find it hard to learn new leadership skills. In academia, one respondent pointed out that **"studies have shown that most of the research being produced at this point in time is from male researchers, because women are expected to bear most of their other responsibilities, particularly in the home."** This implies women's leadership development will be significantly impacted by increased household responsibilities.

**"COVID cut my time in Cambridge short. Everyone had to go home but I couldn't because the airports were closed, and all my friends had left. I was really looking forward to the summer and enjoying reading at the library. I was also concerned about the rising domestic violence, caused by people being stuck at home. But I enjoyed my time at Cambridge, I checked in with my friends as much as I could online, and just kept safe. And I try to be involved in some activism work through our organisation [FeminStyleAfrica](#), which centres and amplifies the stories and experiences of African women both in the continent and diaspora. We offer sisterhood without judgment and our approach is intersectional."**  
One Pusumane, a student from Botswana studying on a scholarship at Cambridge University.

## Impact of COVID-19 on female leadership

	Positively impacted (%)	Negatively impacted (%)	No impact (%)
Interruptions of training and development	19	79	2
Ill-health	31	69	13
Reduction in pay	25	75	0
Reduction in working hours	12	84	4
Limited opportunity to build new networks	14	84	2
Increased opportunity to learn new leadership skills	78	22	0
Flexible working/studying hours	64	33	2
Flexible working/studying locations	66	31	3
Increased opportunity to build new networks online	67	30	3
Promotion: increase opportunity to take up new leadership roles in my institution	79	21	0
Lay off/redundancy/dismissal	18	82	17





# Most Important Leadership Skills

Several skills have been identified as crucial for leadership development, including effective communication and the ability to inspire employees, integrity, problem solving, teamwork, ethics and safety. Cecchini (2015) conducted a survey of over 20,000 professionals in 176 countries and found that effective leaders needed anticipation skills, ability to challenge business assumptions, interpretation skills, decision-making skills, dialogue skills, and learning skills. In tertiary education, strategic, communication, and fundraising skills are the most important ones for effective university and college education leadership.

## Hard vs soft skills in leadership development

According to a 2018 Deloitte survey, a mix of hard and soft power are important for leadership development. The important soft power traits are being communicative, flexible, and patient, while the hard power traits are hard work and confidence. This implies those seeking to be leaders must be able to balance different traits when it comes to effective leadership.

We asked our survey respondents to indicate what skills were the most important for women as they transition into leadership. The survey considered five categories of skill sets.

### Leadership ethics and values:

Leadership ethics and values refer to skills such as integrity, trust, empathy, emotional intelligence, self-awareness and self-confidence.

23% of our survey respondents considered this skill set as important for leadership development.

### Human skills:

Human skills refer to skills including talent management, team building, social integration, collaboration, negotiating and networking.

22% of our respondents indicated that human skills were a critical skill set for women's leadership development at all levels.

### Other skills:

In addition to the skills above, other categories of skills were identified that are equally as important but considered secondary. Industry knowledge and technical communication were among this category representing 9% and 13%, respectively according to the survey.

### Conceptual skills:

Conceptual skills refer to skills including: critical thinking, decision-making, problem-solving, analytical abilities and logical reasoning.

32% of respondents considered conceptual skills to be the most important skillset needed for their leadership development.

Most important leadership skills	Women in tertiary education	All women
Conceptual skills	34%	32%
Human skills	25%	22%
Leadership ethics and values skills	22%	23%
Communication skills	13%	13%
Industry knowledge and technical skills	7%	10%



# INTERVENTIONS

## and their effects on women's leadership Development

From what we have seen so far, it is evident that the challenges women face in accessing leadership are multidimensional ranging from cultural, to structural and individual issues. Making progress will require systematic action by all sectors of the economy, including universities and colleges.

This report has examined various aspects of leadership as well as options that could be exploited to ensure many more women take an interest in leadership and thrive in leadership positions. In this section, we will look at examples of some existing programmes and interventions carried out and the impact they have.

### The most high impact actions

According to the results of the ESSA survey, important actions that support leadership development for women include: scholarships, leadership training, gender sensitive organisational/structure policies, networking and mentoring.

Actions to support leadership development	All Women
<b>Scholarships for women to advance academically and professionally</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Leadership training and development programmes (workshops, internships, webinars, secondments)</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Gender sensitive organisational/structural policies (e.g., recruitment and promotion, flexible working hours etc.)</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Networking programs and opportunities</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Targeting and boosting women's representation (Affirmative Action)</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Mentorship programmes</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Frameworks for benchmarking, tracking, and highlighting organisational gender equity performance.</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Setting up gender units and departments to support women's development</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Gender sensitive school curriculum (awareness on the part of the educator of their own verbal and non-verbal cues when carrying out their lesson plans)</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Creating safe spaces for women (e.g., easy access to sexual and reproductive health services and utilities, day-care centre, breast feeding rooms)</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Highlighting and promoting female role models</b>	<b>2</b>

## INTERVENTIONS

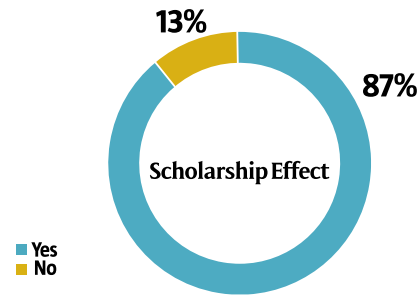
### Scholarships for women

Scholarships increase access to education, improve cognitive skills, and increase employment probabilities. Besides these positive effects, scholarships can potentially affect leadership development especially if there is a leadership element attached to the scholarship programme. The ESSA survey reveals that the majority of those who benefit from scholarships are from academia with 87% affirming that scholarships have had a positive effect on their leadership development. Respondents identified that the scholarships had empowered, motivated and encouraged them to take up leadership positions.

According to one of the interviewees, scholarships play a key role in enhancing women's leadership development and as such it is one of the key focus areas of their organisation:

*"We focus on women and girls and our expectation is that they are part of the decision-making process. Our scholarship programme for girls has a leadership element. Leadership should be part of the early stages of schooling and the day-to-day life of young people. Girls tend to shy away from responsibility even when elected to positions, so the programme is about empowering, motivating and encouraging girls to take up leadership positions"* Martha Muhwezi (Forum for Africa Women Educationalists, FAWE)

Did a scholarship support you in your leadership development?



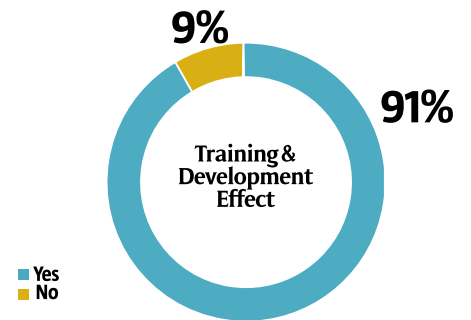
#### Lessons from Industry:

Scholarships are not common in African organisations, but some organisations are beginning to use scholarships as a tool to promote gender equality in their ranks. For instance, credit services company Wafasalaf based in Casablanca, Morocco, has implemented a formal sponsorship programme linking women and senior individuals outside the organisation and has achieved 43% female representation on its executive committee (McKinsey, 2019). This is a model organisations like the 30 Percent Club employ to increase representation of women on all boards and C-suites globally. It is a model that can be explored further for and/or by universities and colleges in sub-Saharan Africa.

## 2. Women leadership development programmes

Leadership programmes significantly contribute to soft skills development for women leaders transiting from technical experts to leaders (Bomett and Wanglachi, 2017). 66% of the survey respondents had participated in leadership training previously while 34% had not.

Did leadership training and development support your leadership development?



Out of those who had participated in leadership training, 91% indicated the trainings had a positive effect on their leadership development. Background literature highlights that there

### ESSA SPOTLIGHT: ACCESS TO EDUCATION

At ESSA, we studied over 400 of the top scholarship programmes around the world for students from sub-Saharan Africa. Our findings uncovered that \$750 million is spent annually but there are problems such as high student drop-out rates, high risks of fraud, limited support for students to find jobs, and limited access for students who need scholarships the most.

The study found that most scholarship providers measured their share of female recipients. Two programmes targeted women exclusively; the share in other programmes ranged from 32% to 57%. This research features in UNESCO's 2020 Global Education Monitoring (GEM) report, on Inclusion and Education, as the official monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goal 4.b on scholarships.

We created a framework for inclusive and impactful scholarships for young people. Our goal is to work with scholarship providers to track progress and ensure young people get the skills they need for work and to succeed in life post-scholarship. This includes under-represented groups in education and work, including women. We also developed the African Scholarships Hub – an online database helping students in Africa find the right scholarships for them.



are several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international nongovernmental organisations (INGOs) offering women's leadership development programmes on the continent but, these programmes differ across a range of variables including: duration of the training, targeted population, geographic reach, and programmatic content. Most are open to women continent-wide, while some are designed for specific contexts or sectors.

Capacity development programmes to support women's career planning and development also exist in most sub-Saharan African universities. For example, the University of Cape Town GSB Developing Women in Leadership programme is designed for aspiring women leaders who are interested in self-development, career advancement and personal fulfilment. The programme equips women to become more self-aware, connect more authentically with others and successfully manage relationships. HERS-SA, a South African pro-

“Most of the programmes are short-term and focus on providing training in a limited number of basic leadership skills. However, some do include key features such as mentoring, and a service project to allow participants to learn and apply newly acquired skills in a hands-on, meaningful experience that contributes to their community. “

To achieve concrete results as far as leadership is concerned, it is important to ensure the training programmes are designed to fully equip women with required leadership skills. MCF define 7 components that leadership programmes should include: (1) Promotion of global awareness and analysis of major societal challenges, (2) development of transferable and professional skills, (3) cultivation of self-awareness and self-knowledge, with a focus on ethics, values and gender, (4) internships (5) mentorship and role models, (6) leadership practice through a service learning project and, (7) networking support.

Research Training in Africa (CARTA) covers the full cost for female doctoral fellows who are breastfeeding mothers to bring their child and a babysitter along for a month-long residential training seminar (Khisa et.al, 2019). Additionally, the funding time is paused during their maternity leave, if they request it, with funding resuming upon their return to doctoral studies.

Examples of organisational/structural policies from tertiary education institutions:

In order to improve women's representation and participation in leadership, tertiary education institutions have also responded by seeking to increase enrolments for women. Over the past decade, affirmative actions – especially lowering admission cut off for female candidates – have been used by universities and colleges to increase women's participation in education.

Many universities across the sub-region have es-



gramme focused on the advancement and leadership development of women in the Higher Education sector. Activities include career development workshops, and opportunities for networking with women academic leaders at national and international conferences. Programmes also exist at individual universities e.g., African Leadership University and University of Ghana, among others.

Despite the existence of programmes such as these, an evaluation of women's leadership development programmes on the continent by the [Mastercard Foundation](#) revealed that, only a few of the programmes that were identified focus on the qualities of character, ethics, and self-assessment that are integral to transformative leadership (MCF, 2018). Also, the programmes that exist do not meet the current needs of women on the continent.

### 3. Organisational/structural policies

To enable the emergence of more women leaders, it is important to create a positive, inclusive and supportive environment for women. Without the proper infrastructure and policies, women are unable to achieve unfettered career and leadership success. Clear promotion pathways, flexible working, childcare provision, and supportive parental leave policies are all essential elements for professional and leadership development among women.

It is also imperative to support women when they leave work to have children. Some best practices are being implemented in universities and colleges. For instance, the Consortium for Advanced

established gender units/programmes/centres to teach and carry out gender research with a strong component of activism for gender equity. The idea has been to use the research findings as a basis for advocacy for gender equity. Examples include the Makerere University Women's Studies Department, in Uganda, which has played a significant role in gender mainstreaming work across universities in Africa through, among other things, conducting research and gender-mainstreaming workshops for top university management staff.

To improve the quality and quantity of women in higher education leadership, most universities and colleges in the sub-region have implemented gender-based recruitment, promotion, and staff development strategies and programmes. For example, in South Africa, the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP) recruits new

## 🌍 INTERVENTIONS

academics against a carefully designed and balanced equity considerations framework. Also, in collaboration with international development organisations such as the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), World Bank, and MasterCard Foundation, some universities and colleges in sub-Saharan Africa offer women-only scholarships aimed at developing the leadership skills and qualities of women.

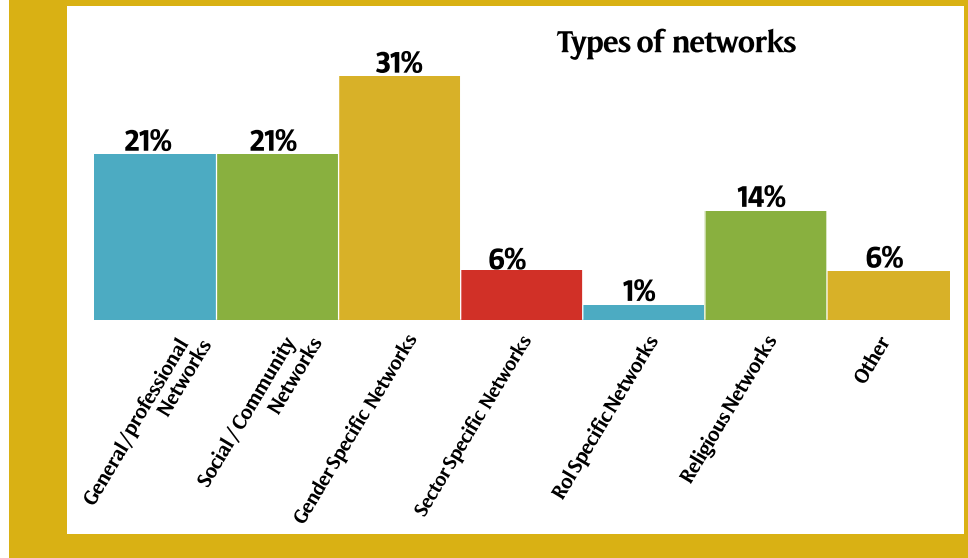
Most universities also have in place capacity enhancement programmes aimed at improving the quality of female academics. Strategies in this area include support for existing female junior academics to complete their doctoral studies or through addressing specific gaps concerning teaching development, research development, social engagement, and academic leadership. In most cases, mentorship is a key component of this intervention. An example is the Staffing South Africa's Universities Development Programme (SSAU-DP) which focuses on both research and teaching development.

### Lessons from industry:

At the corporate level, some African companies have put in place leave policies not only for mothers but for fathers as well. For instance, Diageo, now offers 26 weeks of parental leave to allow men to spend more time with their families upon the arrival of a new child. By normalising the absence of both genders from the workplace due to parental duties, such a policy has the potential to reduce the stigma that is sometimes attached to a woman's time off on maternity leave and to share the burden of family care more equally. Furthermore, these fathers are better able to provide support at home that could make re-entry into the workplace a less stressful process for new mothers.

Further examples of organisational/structural policies include gender targets and leadership quotas:

- Tigo, a Millicom brand in the telecommunications industry, has undertaken multiple efforts to increase the promotion of women, as well as the presence of women, in senior management. Within its African operations, Tigo has increased women in senior management from 7% to 26% in two years.
- Some organisations also set targets for women's representation in leadership positions. For instance, financial services group, Absa, has a target of 30% female board representation.
- Nigeria's central bank mandates that all banks in the country should have 30% female representation on boards.
- Some multinational organisations with operations in Africa also set targets for their subsidiaries. For instance, French company, Orange requires all



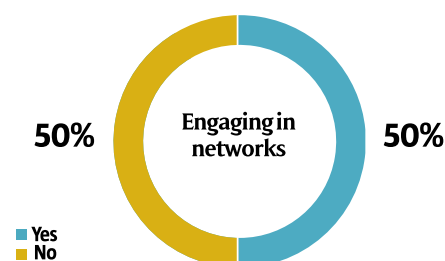
its subsidiaries to implement a target of 35% female representation at the board level according to the AfDB (2015).

- Implementing quota systems have proven to be the main lever behind progress made on women's representation in leadership in some African countries. Rwanda's constitution mandates that women account for at least 30% of all decision-making bodies in the government, including its bicameral parliament. In addition, Rwanda is unique in having women-only elections in which only women stand for office and only women vote. This policy has led political parties to adopt quotas for the number of women candidates.

## 4. Networking programmes and opportunities

Access to networks is essential for leadership development. However, women do not often have access to network opportunities. In a 2010 publication, Ballenger, Julia (2010) argues that, due to the "old boy network" most men leaders tend to sponsor other men to leadership positions. Exclusion from networks not only affects women career progression but leadership development. Not all women are part of a network despite the important role this plays in enabling women to discuss achievements, challenges and brainstorm potential solutions. While 50% of the respondents affirmed that they were actively engaged in networks, the other 50% said they were not. For women in STEM a slightly lower number, 44% were engaged in networks.

### Are you engaged in or part of any networks?



### Participation in different types of networks

Networks vary in nature from general professional networks to, gender-specific networks (e.g. Forum for African Women Educationalists), sector-specific networks (Association of Accountants) and social/community networks (e.g. Rotary Club). A large proportion of the respondents surveyed belonged to/participated in three types of network: Gender-specific networks (31%), Social/Community Networks (21%) and General Professional Networks (21%).

### Role of networks

The ESSA survey sought to understand the benefits derived from participation in different types of networks. The results identified the main benefits of gender-specific networks to be:

- Access to training and other resources
- Opportunity to make an impact through a common voice
- Opportunity to lead/learn about leadership

The gender-specific forum offers women the opportunity to share experiences with their peers. One respondent pointed out that "women feel more confident to share their stories when it's just us."

Further research is required to gather a deeper understanding of what constitutes an effective network to support women leadership.

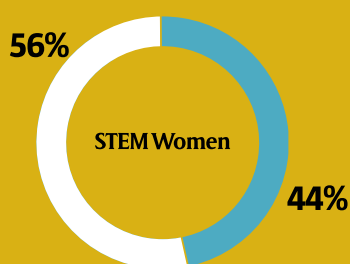
Benefits of network participation	General professional networks	Social/community networks	Gender-specific networks	Sector-specific networks	Role-specific networks	Religious networks	Other
Avenue for new opportunities	21%	25%	28%	10%	3%	6%	7%
Gain access to training and other resources	24%	19%	38%	5%	2%	5%	8%
Gain support from experts and high-profile individuals	22%	24%	26%	9%	0%	11%	9%
Skills development	23%	20%	32%	8%	3%	8%	7%
The group provides a safe “place” to go for advice and support	8%	21%	26%	8%	3%	24%	11%
Opportunity to make an impact (address important issues) through a common voice	15%	18%	38%	8%	3%	11%	8%
Opportunity to meet new people and be part of a network of colleagues	22%	14%	36%	8%	3%	11%	8%
Opportunity to share expertise with more people	25%	22%	27%	10%	2%	10%	5%
Opportunity to lead/learn about leadership	13%	17%	36%	7%	1%	14%	10%
Receive ongoing spiritual encouragement and support	17%	17%	22%	7%	2%	29%	5%

## ADDITIONAL ACTIONS TO ENHANCE WOMEN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT:

### 5. Mentorship programmes

Mentorship programmes are critical in terms of

Are you engaged in or part of any networks (Women in STEM)



leadership development specifically because, they improve self-esteem, increase professional skills, increase insight, and provide greater awareness of different approaches. According to the results of ESSA's survey, out of all those who participated in mentorship programmes, 89% indicated it had a positive effect on their leadership development

and, for women in tertiary education, 90% indicated mentorship programmes had a positive effect on their leadership development.

**“I was lucky enough that I was mentored by Akili Dada, this was grounding for me...”**

Mary Ojwang, founding member of the Women Students Mentorship Association (WOSWA) said and added:

“Organisations should work together to provide mentorship to young women which is essential to our growth. I was mentored by a leader. I was taken through a number of leadership skills and several mentorships about the core of emotional intelligence, how to handle yourself, as well as moral values and how to set your goals. As I progressed, I moved from being an Akili Dada mentee to becoming a mentor in the university and beyond. I

had so many girls under my mentorship who came to learn and understand how they can learn from their institutions. Most of these ladies are now elected women leaders in their respective universities/institutions”.

She went further to share the story of her leadership journey with us:

“Growing up, I had always had an interest in politics and an understanding of the challenges young women like myself face in the political space.

My leadership journey at the University of Nairobi started in 2015 at the first year I was elected to the Congress. During my studies at the University of Nairobi, I decided to explore my interests in politics. I had heard young women politicians were often subjected to all forms of harassment, bullying and name-calling. I knew it was not going to be an easy journey for me, but I was determined to change the status quo. In my first year, I was elected as the Congress Representative for the University of

## INTERVENTIONS

Nairobi, a major step closer to my political ambitions.

Once elected as the President of the Women Students Welfare Association (WOSWA), I learned the challenges. I could now clearly understand why there were less women into student politics in 2015. Working in this student leadership position helped me better understand why few women in the university ventured into the political space despite the gender policies instituted by the university to support women. When I became a member of the Congress, I realised that we needed more young women in politics, and this could be achieved through the support of women organisations. I joined WOSWA that championed for the rights and wellbeing of female students in University of Nairobi. I engaged with various young women, encouraging them to aspire for leadership positions in politics to be part of decision-making processes.

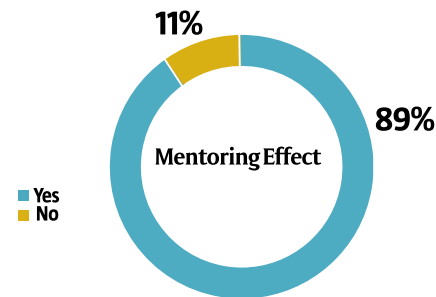
Most young women had agreed to join the student leadership because of my initiatives. We have conversations about leadership on campus, showing women the types of campaigns to run, and how they can juggle through and win an election. My team had identified that bullying was a major barrier preventing women from contesting in university elections. In view of this, we had a conversation with university management to discuss ways of promoting women in leadership positions. As an outcome from the engagements, students who engaged in all forms of bullying or harassments faced disciplinary actions.

Actually, when you elect women they think about change, they think about platforms for other women. Women leadership is always associated with skills as compared to men's leadership. My team at WOSWA also organised programmes where young women in STEM visit secondary schools to mentor and encourage the secondary school girls to consider STEM courses at the universities. Sharing stories of personal leadership experiences and providing mentorship are important in encouraging more women to take up leadership roles.

Having a young woman in a leadership position encourages more young women to come and take up leadership roles. In the 2017 Kenya elections, I contested for the position of women member of the national assembly and although I did not come out as a winner, I was the youngest contestant in 2017 and by that most young women in learning institutions have learnt something from me, not having a degree or being a student is not a limitation for you to not join national politics.

We still need more initiatives as well as having young women who can speak up and share their experience of being in political spaces. There is still a lot to do in educating women that we are equally capable as men and can easily attain leadership roles. We will continue to work to expand our association to many universities and colleges in Kenya to support women."

### Did mentoring have an effect on leadership development?

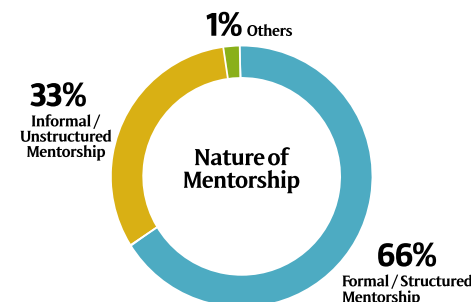


## Format of mentorship programmes

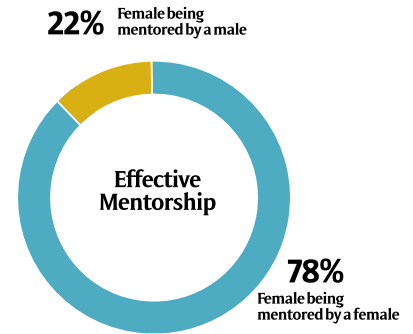
### Structured and unstructured mentorship programs

The majority of survey respondents (66%) were engaged in formal /structured mentoring and, 33% informal /unstructured. Respondents also identified that the most effective form of mentoring involved women mentoring other women. Therefore, the results imply that mentorship interventions for women need to be formal/structured and female-led. Further research and evidence is required to fully define the characteristics of formal/structured mentoring in order to support implementation efforts. A comment added by one of our respondents, suggests that women mentored by other women are more likely to pass that mentorship to others: *"I was mentored by a leader and as I progressed, I moved from being a mentee to becoming a mentor."*

### What was the nature of the mentorship you participated in?



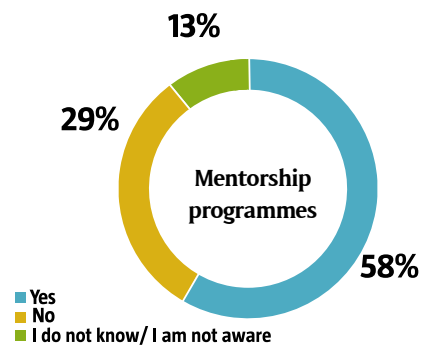
### Which type of mentorship is more effective for women?



## Institutions offering mentorship programmes

Despite the important role mentorship plays and its positive effect on leadership, only 58% of the institutions represented within the ESSA survey have mentorship programmes. In tertiary education, 48% of respondents confirmed their university or college offers mentorship programmes. These programs play a key role in education and are therefore indispensable towards enhancing women's leadership aspirations.

### Does your institution offer mentorship programmes?



## 6. Role Modelling

Role modelling has an undeniable impact on women in leadership especially because it helps in enhancing a sense of belonging and identity in leadership, thereby fostering a personal connection between women. A study carried out in India by Beaman (2012) provided evidence that the presence of women on village councils enabled by affirmative action had a positive influence on girls' career aspirations and educational attainment. According to a KPMG report on women in leadership (2015), 86% of women reported that when they see more women in leadership, they are encouraged they can get there themselves. Furthermore, 67% reported they had learned the most important lessons about leadership from other women. The ESSA survey shows that, 87% of the respondents have role models and 79% are aware of role models within their profession.

## Effects of role modelling on leadership development

Out of the 87% who have role models, 96% of them affirmed that, their role models had a positive effect on their leadership development. The results were similar in tertiary education where 93% of respondents indicated role models had a positive effect on their leadership development.

**“Women require role models, and they need mentors. One major mentorship component is for women to be each other’s keepers, so in every environment it is important to support one another. One of the programmes we developed was about empowering girls to say and mean ‘no’ and speak out about issues that happen. Women in leadership need respect and should not be looked down upon, they should be seen as people that are rightfully deserving of those positions.”** Martha Muhwezi stated while emphasising the key role role modelling played in women’s leadership development.

## Different categories of role models

Different types of people can act as role models for an individual. According to the results of ESSA’s survey, professional/academic mentors and family members are among the role models with the highest impact on leadership development (see table below: Categories of role models that have a positive impact on leadership development). In tertiary education on the other hand, role models with the highest leadership impact are the family members and work colleagues.

## Consequences of the absence of role models

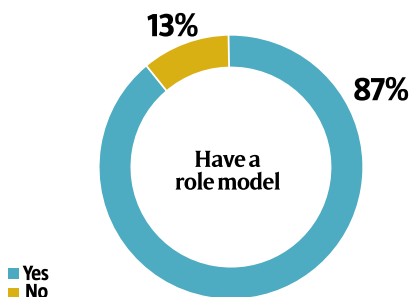
Even though female role models play a key role across sectors as evident from the results of our survey, they are scarce in some sectors. 58% of our respondents feel that there is a shortage of role models within their profession. In STEM, the proportion is much higher, at 62%.

Given the shortage of role models, 91% of women suggest there is need for more women role models to be encouraged. For women in STEM, 93% suggested there is need for more women to be promoted within their profession. Additionally, 96% of respondents suggested there is need to hear more success stories. For women in STEM, 98% suggested that, hearing success stories from other women in their profession is critical for their leadership development. After having looked at mentorship and role modelling, the next programme will be networking.

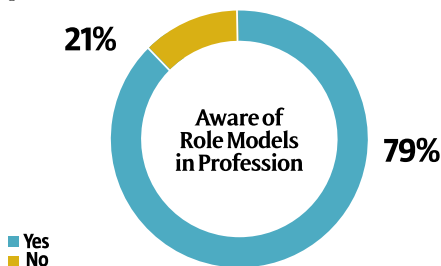
## 7. Research and advocacy on women leadership

Governments, private sector institutions, and universities and colleges need data and evidence to make decisions and implement programmes that promote women’s participation in leadership. For this reason, most researchers and research institutions have long supported the evaluation, data collection, and research on women leadership in Africa. Evidence generated from these research studies is used as advocacy tools to influence policies and create awareness about women’s leadership.

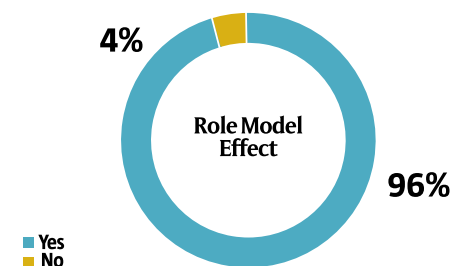
Respondents with role models



Respondents’ awareness of role models in their profession



Effect of role model on leadership development



**ESSA SPOTLIGHT:  
QUALITY OF EDUCATION**

ESSA conducted a study of the current number of faculty in Ghana and their demographics.

This was done in partnership with the Association of African Universities (AAU), the Population Reference Bureau (PRB) and the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC) - formally National Council for Tertiary Education (NCTE).

The 2019 study found that only 8% of professors at public universities in Ghana were women. Similar studies have revealed that only 2.7% of University Vice Chancellors are Women. In Nigeria, research has also indicated that only 17% of principal officers are women.



Our partnership has expanded to include the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA). Together we are extending and scaling up the study in Ghana by undertaking a new study in the East African Community (EAC). Our goal is to strengthen the ability of higher education stakeholders (including governments and universities) to plan and implement evidence-informed responses targeted at improving the numbers and the nature of quality faculty within Higher Education Institutions in the EAC.

Categories of role models that have a positive impact on leadership development

Category	All women	Women in tertiary education
Mentor (professional, academic, or other)	52%	47%
Family member (mother, aunt, sister, etc.)	44%	59%
Work colleague (supervisor, manager, peers, CEO (Chief Executive Officer), etc.)	41%	52%
School figure (teacher, professor, school counsellor, etc.)	38%	42%
Religious or civic community figure	25%	32%
Personal friend or acquaintance	23%	29%
Public figure or celebrity (politician, athlete, TV, music, movie star, etc.)	22%	23%
Virtual friend or acquaintance (someone you mostly have contact with online)	10%	9%
Fictional character (from a TV show, movie, video game, book, etc.)	10%	8%



## Examples of recently published commissioned research on women leadership

Organisation	Title of study	Reference
MasterCard Foundation	Women's Transformative Leadership in Africa	<a href="https://mastercardfdn.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Womens-Transformative-Leadership-2014-accessible.pdf">https://mastercardfdn.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Womens-Transformative-Leadership-2014-accessible.pdf</a>
McKinsey and Company	1.Women Matter Africa 2.The Power of Parity: Advancing Women's Equality in Africa	<a href="https://www.mckinsey.com">https://www.mckinsey.com</a>
The Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE)	FAWE Research Series Vol. 1,2, and 3	<a href="http://fawe.org">http://fawe.org</a>
BSR (Business for Social Responsibility)	Women's Economic Empowerment in Sub-Saharan Africa: Recommendations for Business Action	<a href="https://www.bsr.org/en/our-insights/report-view/womens-economic-empowerment-sub-saharan-africa-business-action">https://www.bsr.org/en/our-insights/report-view/womens-economic-empowerment-sub-saharan-africa-business-action</a>



### ESSA SPOTLIGHT: KNOWLEDGE ECOSYSTEM

**At ESSA, we support educators, policy-makers, employers, young people and investors to use data and evidence to drive their decisions, helped by local researchers and civil society.**

**Our African Education Research Database, created in partnership with the REAL Centre at the University of Cambridge, is making African-led research on education more accessible. Out of 2510 researchers in our database, 32% are female. Our goal is to raise the profile of female academics in sub-Saharan Africa and increase the use of their evidence in education policy and delivery.**





# From Evidence to Action

**B**ased on the information gathered, it is undeniable that women are under-represented at leadership levels in SSA, including within the tertiary education sector. There is more that can be done to equip and empower women in seeking and attaining leadership. Although women are accessing leadership, significant numbers are dissatisfied with their current level of leadership. Women still face barriers to leadership, including socio-cultural expectations, limited access to mentorship and networking opportunities, unhelpful working environment and policies and barriers relating to mindset. The COVID-19 pandemic is also particularly impacting women. Our research has highlighted conceptual skills (e.g. critical thinking/decision-making/problem solving/analytical abilities, logical reasoning) as the most important skillset for leadership development of women in all sectors. This is followed by leadership ethics and values (e.g., integrity/trust/empathy/emotional intelligence/self-awareness/self-confidence). Our research also points to four key types of support that will have a high impact on the leadership

development for women. These are: scholarships, leadership training and development programmes, gender sensitive organisational/structural policies and networking programmes and opportunities.

## Our recommendations

We recognise that our findings cannot be taken as fully representative of women across sub-Saharan Africa. We hope our work contributes useful insights (from the women in SSA) and provides guidance on where further research, evidence and action is needed to unlock the potential of women leaders, in and through education.

Having more women in leadership positions is important but this cannot be the only goal for gender equality in leadership. It is important to also consider what type of support is required to sustain women in leadership. Government, industry, universities and colleges have a role to play.

## For universities and colleges:

- **Making use of affirmative action** as an immediate response in universities and colleges for improving women's representation and participation in leadership is increasing enrolments for females.
- **Creating opportunities** for female students to participate in leadership roles since leadership development in students is considered a priority at contemporary institutions of tertiary education (Astin & Astin, 2000).
- **Establishing gender departments** and programmes to teach and carry out gender research with a strong component of activism for gender equity. The idea has been to use the research findings as a basis for advocacy for gender equity.
- **Increasing the number and raising the levels of women** academics and administrators with the aim of improving the quality of female academics as well as providing support for existing female junior academics to complete their doctoral studies or through addressing specific gaps concerning teaching development, research development, social engagement, and academic leadership.

# MORE ABOUT ESSA

Decisions should be taken based on evidence and data to maximise scarce resources and improve young people's lives.

Yet, there are big gaps in data and evidence about the relevance of university and college for work. For example, we do not know the most cost-effective ways to support more young people to attend university or college (especially girls and women), or where young people go after they leave education.

This leads to low, badly targeted investment.

That is why at ESSA we support university and college leaders, employers, policymakers, and young people to turn evidence into practical solutions and maximise resources.

By working together, we turn evidence into action: improving education policies and delivery.



- Putting in place **formal mentorship and sponsorship programmes** for women since these programmes have a significant impact on women's leadership development but are not commonplace in African tertiary institutions.
- Regulators for universities and colleges should **publish records of women enrolments** in universities and female leadership roles in education. Visibility of these statistics can highlight where progress is being made, and where further improvements are required.
- There should be specific **leadership development programmes** aimed at building the leadership capacities of women.

## For female leaders and students within universities and colleges

- Women should **form communities** and share their experiences. This will give them a sense of belonging especially because women feel more confident to share their stories among themselves.
- Women should be encouraged to have a **solid**

**network/support** system which also play a significant role in developing a young woman's confidence/ leadership skills.

- More women initiatives are needed as well as having young women who can speak up and **share their experience** of being into political leadership spaces.
- 

## For education policy makers:

- **Making use of data** to determine what measures must be taken, what targets must be put in place, and what policies are needed to improve the numbers of women in leadership positions. What this means is that countries in SSA need to collect data on the state of women's leadership, which will help track progress and inform appropriate policy actions.
- Creating a positive, inclusive, and **supportive environment** for women. This could be done by putting in place the infrastructure and policies to enable women achieve unfettered career and leadership success. Implementing **gender quotas** in leadership to ensure greater women rep-

resentation in leadership.

## For organisations (business and academic):

- Ensure **promotion and recruitment processes** are fair and encourage leadership opportunities, since the lack of women in leadership can have ripple effects throughout the talent pipeline.
- Institute **gender targets** and promotion of women into leadership positions by ensuring that, gender diversity on boards and executive committees is a priority and needs to be proactive in setting policies and communicating their vision to employees. Establishing targets for women's representation in the workplace needs to be prioritised.
- Incentivise women to apply for leadership positions by employing **flexibility in recruitment**.
- Encourage more **informal leadership opportunities** in the company to afford women the opportunities to share their views and channel concerns and issues to company leadership.
- Invest in **training and mentorship programmes** for women to enable them to build their self-esteem and their tangible leadership skills.

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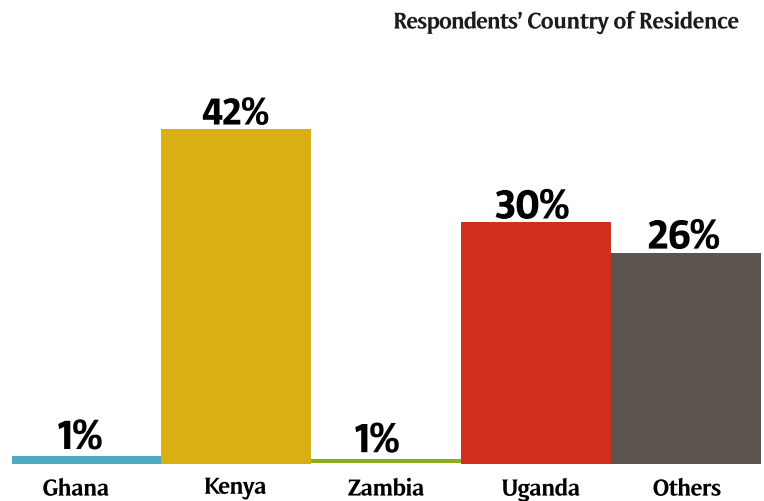
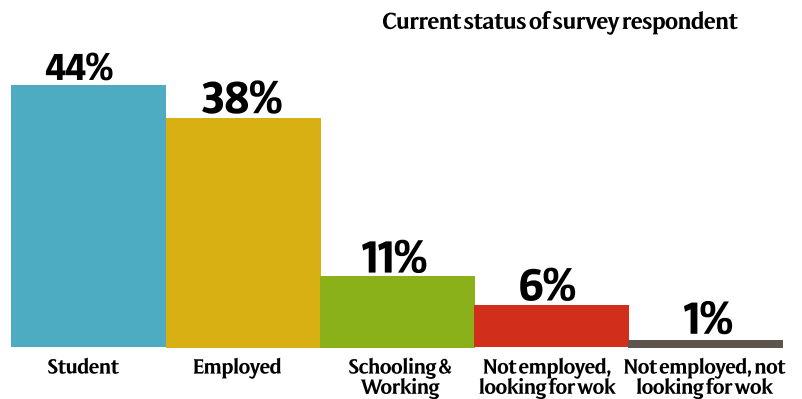
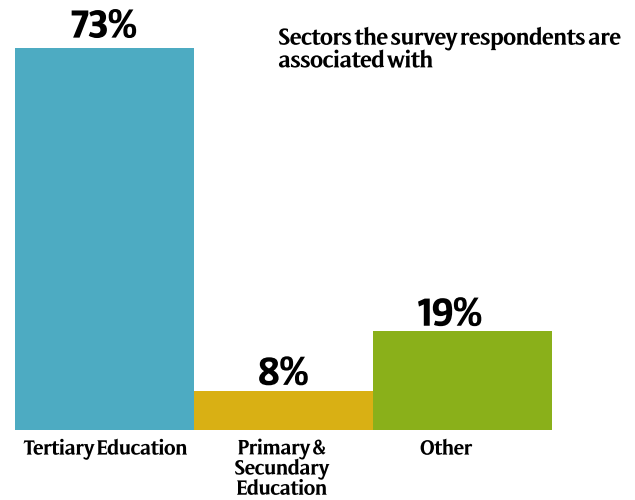
# ABOUT THE REPORT

**O**ur study utilises a mixed method research approach (qualitative and quantitative) in collecting and analysing data on women's leadership in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). This allowed for a better understanding of the barriers to female leadership and the scope of existing interventions for women, as well as identify models of effective practice from within and outside the tertiary education sector.

This study included an analysis of: desk research, focus groups, interviews within organisations promoting female leadership, and a survey to women in universities and colleges, in the study body, in the private sector and those transitioning to employment and work.

The desk research included literature from policy-making bodies, business, media and press articles and academic research articles. 11 focused interviews and discussions were conducted in order to collect different perspectives of a female's path to leadership, including barriers to leadership, existing solutions and the role of universities, colleges and the labour market in fostering women leadership.

The Women in Leadership Survey sought to collect demographic information; understanding of how respondents define leadership; respondent's leadership aspirations and existing performance; leadership skills and qualities; barriers women face in accessing leadership; awareness, access, benefits, and effect of existing interventions on women leadership development.





# THE STATE OF WOMEN LEADING REPORT

July 2021

We wish to extend special thanks to our partners and sponsors. Your engagement and support have been invaluable in bringing this research to fruition. ESSA's contribution to unlocking the potential of women leaders is in supporting and working with universities, colleges and organisations like yours, to understand the evidence and co-create solutions. Our ambition is to continue to identify issues and bring together evidence of what works and what is needed to drive change. We will do this through continued partnerships, stakeholder consultations and engagement. We look forward to continuing this work with you all and building on what we have started.

African Union Youth Envoy



FAWE Forum for African Women Educationalists  
Forum des éducatrices africaines



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