TEMPERED RADICALS AND SERVANT LEADERS: PORTRAITS OF SPIRITED LEADERSHIP AMONGST AFRICAN WOMEN LEADERS

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ABSTRACT

Judy A. Alston, Advisor

There have been few studies on experiences of African women in leadership. In this study, I aimed at contributing to bridging that literature gap by adding the voices of African women leaders who live and work in or near Nairobi Kenya in East Africa. The purpose of this study was to explore, explain and seek to understand women’s leadership through the lived experiences of sixteen women leaders from Africa. The study was an exploration of how these women leaders navigated the intersecting oppressive forces emanating from gender, culture, religion, social norm stereotypes, race, marital status and age as they attempted to lead for social justice.

The central biographical methodology utilized for this study was portraiture, with the express aim of celebrating and learning from the resiliency and strength of the women leaders in the face of adversities and challenges to their authority as leaders. Leadership is influence and a process of meaning making amongst people to engender commitment to common goals, expressed in a community of practice. I presented short herstories of eleven of the women leaders, and in depth portraits of the other five who best illustrated and expanded the a priori conceptual framework.

The study contributes to the understanding of leadership by adding the voices of African women to the debates on leadership experiences and expressions. The conceptual framework consisted of three elements: Africana spirituality, tempered radicalism and servant leadership. The data demonstrated that the three elements combined to produce what I have referred to as spirited leadership. As servant leaders, the women empower their constituents, build or
reconstruct community, heal both themselves and their constituents, and enact service because it brings them fulfillment. As tempered radicals, the women portrayed a range of strategies from quiet resistance, to utilizing personal threats as learning opportunities, acting as intercultural boundary spanners, leveraging small wins and collectivizing among others. Spirituality served as a source for direction and purpose in life and leadership, a source of leadership practices and strength in the midst of challenges. Put together, all these resulted in spirited leaders who are both tempered radicals and servant leaders.
To God be the Glory

Great things He hath done

“Though you have made me see troubles,
Many and bitter,
You will restore my life again.
You will increase my honor
And comfort me once again”

Psalm 71:20-21

To Moses Mukira Ngunjiri,
March 25, 1976 - February 28, 1997

R.I.P.
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SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTIONS

CHAPTER I: CONTEXTUAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

As a group, women around the world have often been under-represented in leadership positions, in a process sometimes referred to in terms of a glass ceiling, one they can see through but cannot get through unless they break the glass (Weiss, 1999). African women are no exception; they find themselves surrounded by cultural, social, economic, and political barriers to ascending to positions of leadership. However, in spite of multiple challenges, African women can be found in several leadership roles. These include but are not limited to: primary school head teachers; secondary school head teachers; college principals; higher education administrators; banking institution chairs of boards; banking sector managers; members of parliament; and executive officers in industry; non-governmental organizations and private institutions (Mabokela, 2003a, 2003b; Maina & Kabira, 1997; Masinjila, 1997; Mbugua-Muriithi, 1996; Nzomo, 1997; Ombati, 2003; T. N. Otieno, 1995; Tamale, 2000). Most studies conducted about African women have concentrated on explicating the marginalized status of women and the subsequent deficiencies in access to resources, education, employment, land, property and human rights (Arndt, 2000; Marshall, 2001; Muteshi, 1998; Ndunda, 1995; Oboler, 1985; Oduol & Kabira, 1995; Oduyoye, 1995; Olusi, 1999; Opefeyitimi, 1998; Presley, 1992). In the following section, I will broadly define the context of women and leadership as a backdrop against which this study was conceived.

Context of Women and Leadership

Over the past few decades, the broad area of women and leadership has garnered studies both in academic circles as well as in the popular leadership press (Rhode, 2003; Rosenbach & Taylor, 2001; Weiss, 1999; Wilson, 2004). Some scholars have examined various issues relating
to women and leadership ranging from whether women lead differently from men, how women lead, where women leaders can be found, and how women leaders are missing in action in most sectors (Ridgeway, 2001; Rigg & Sparrow, 1994; Rosenbach & Taylor, 2001; Wilson, 2004). Some of the researchers on women’s leadership in the Global North investigated the topic in response to the notion of a glass ceiling that hindered women’s ascent on the corporate ladder (Weiss, 1999). These studies demonstrated that there are very few women in leadership positions especially in the corporate world and education, in spite of the fact that women make up about half of the working population (Morrison & Glinow, 1990; Weiss, 1999; Wilson, 2004). Other researchers have expanded the research by exploring the differences in men and women’s leadership styles (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Lipman-Blumen, 1992).

In recent years, another strain of research has been devoted to the study of black women’s leadership, in recognition of the fact that earlier studies concentrated on white middle class women or white middle class men as the norm (Parker & ogilvie, 1996). Researchers investigating black women and leadership have explored how black women lead and found that black women are under-represented in both corporate and educational leadership (Alston, 2000, 2005; Jones, 2003; Parker, 2005; Parker & ogilvie, 1996). The studies are many and varying in subject, however, there remains a dearth of research and literature on women in Africa and their leadership experiences.

African women and their leadership experiences have not received sufficient scholarly study, with the few existing studies directed at political involvement or the lack of African women in leadership in educational institutions (Mabokela, 2003a; Ombati, 2003; Tamale, 2000; Tripp, 2001b). In other studies on African women, their participation in leadership is mentioned in passing only. For example, African scholars in gender studies recognize that the women’s
movement in Africa was initiated and continues to be sustained through women’s agency (Ndunda, 1995; Nzomo, 1997; Tamale, 2004; Tripp, 2001b). That is, women have collectivized in order to come up with solutions to problems that assail them as women, as economically marginalized populations, as mothers, and as Africans in a global economy (Ndunda, 1995; Tamale, 2000, 2004; Tripp, 2001a; Uraizee, 2000). Such women’s collectives or groups are led by women, many of whom move from grassroots organizing to national or parliamentary leadership (AAWORD, 1998). By African women, I am referring to women in the African continent. Otherwise, I specify women in Africa and the Diaspora or Africana Women to refer to all black African women of African descent wherever they reside, Africa, Europe, the Americas and the Caribbean. I have only come across a few studies exploring women in leadership in educational institutions in Kenya and South Africa, as well as a few exploring the experiences of women leaders in East and Southern Africa (Chisholm, 2001; Mabokela, 2003a; Ombati, 2003; Phendla, 2000; Tamale, 2000).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this portraiture study was to discover, describe, and understand women’s leadership with a select number of women leaders based in Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya in East Africa. The current study explored, established, and attempted to comprehend how select women leaders in an African context transverse gender, traditional culture, organizational culture, social norm stereotypes, and other constraints to their authority and leadership. In that way, it was possible to have a more complete picture of women’s leadership in general, and in Africa in particular, by contrasting the current deficit model using portraiture’s search for goodness, through stories of resiliency and success in the face of challenges and constraints. Leadership will be understood in terms of making meaning amongst people to engender
commitment (Drath & Palus, 1994), and a specialized role as well as a social influence (Yukl, 2001) practiced within a community. I focus on generating and co-creating in-depth portraits of these women leaders in order to understand how each woman navigates the terrain of leadership in context. I will also seek to decipher common threads running through all the women’s narratives and leadership experiences.

Significance of Study

There is a dearth of scholarly studies on African women in leadership (Bakare-Yusuf, 2003; Chisholm, 2001; Kamau, 1996; Mabokela, 2003a, 2003b; Mama, 2002; Mbugua-Muriithi, 1996; Ombati, 2003). Part of the significance of this study is adding African voices to the literature on women and leadership. Leadership scholars and practitioners will gain valuable insights by learning about leadership from a different perspective. The portraits of African women leaders illuminate leadership theory that is vital in gaining a wider outlook of a global yet local phenomenon. This study is also significant for the participants, as an opportunity to have their voice heard beyond their localized context. It is also of significance to other black women leaders in Africa and the Diaspora who may be inspired by learning about them their African counterparts.

Conceptual Framework

The study of women’s leadership has contributed to the understanding of leadership in general from various perspectives. Of significance to the study of women in leadership is the recognition that women may or may not lead differently from men, depending on the context in which they lead. Parker and ogilvie (1999) observed that for African American women executives, surviving and thriving within the context of racism and sexism demanded an androgynous leadership style. My conceptual framework will incorporate ideas from the research
of Dr. Judy Alston (2000, 2005) and Dr. Khaula Murtadha (1999), both of whom have extensive experience in studying African American female educational administrators. Dr. Sharyn Jones’ (2003) dissertation research on African American women educational administrators, especially as pertains to spirituality and tempered radicals, was also useful in formulating this frame. My conceptual frame is also informed by Black Feminist and Africana Womanist theorists who posited an epistemology informed by the experiences of black women in Africa and the Diaspora (Collins, 1996, 1998, 2000; Hudson-Weems, 1997; Ntiri, 2001). According to Collins, Hudson-Weems and Ntiri, Black Feminist and Africana Womanist theorizing advocates the use of black women’s experiences in theory building as a valid and constructive scholarly endeavor in the pursuit of an understanding of Black and African women. This framework is developed with the understanding that a study of African women’s leadership must be informed by the notion of distinctive interpretations of African women’s oppression under racism, sexism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, and patriarchal culture as well as African women’s use of alternative means of producing and validating knowledge (Alston, 2000; Amadiume, 1997; Bakare-Yusuf, 2003; Collins, 1996; Murtadha-Watts, 1999; Oyewumi, 2002).

The conceptual framework consists of three interrelated components understood within the scaffold of women’s experience, that are useful in understanding the leadership experiences of African women; Africana spirituality, tempered radicalism and servant leadership.

_Africana Spirituality_

In his seminal work on African spirituality, Paris (1995) observed that,

Africans brought their worldviews with them into the Diaspora, and as a result of their interaction with their new environments, their African worldviews were gradually altered into a new-African consciousness… religion permeates every dimension of African life.
In spite of the many and varied religious systems the ubiquity of religious consciousness among African peoples constitutes their single most important common characteristic (p. 24, 27).

That is, African peoples all over the globe share a spirituality that has been recognized as distinctively African in its explanations of phenomena and its understanding of God as the definitive source and sustainer of life (Paris, 1995; Shorter, 1974). This same spiritual worldview has been found to undergird the leadership experiences and practices of black and African women (Jones, 2003; Murtadha-Watts, 1999; Reid-Merritt, 1996). Researchers such as Alston, Jones, and Murtadha-Watts who studied black women leaders found that a profound spirituality imbued their leadership experiences and consistently appeared as a source of resiliency amidst structural sexism and racism. Spirituality also informs and permeates the teaching and research of black women scholars (Dillard, Abdur-Rashid, & Tyson, 2000). Murtadha-Watts (1999) referred to the participants in her study as spirited sisters, black women leaders for whom spirituality was a constant source of inner strength, divine direction, and courage under fire.

Tempered radicals

The notion of tempered radicals arose out of the research of Debra Meyerson and Maureen Scully (1995), who conducted interviews and observations of leaders in different occupations to understand how those who did not fit the majority mold exercised leadership. According to Meyerson (2001), tempered radicals are men and women who find themselves as poor fits with the dominant culture of their organizations: “Tempered radicals want to fit in and they want to retain what makes them different. They want to rock the boat, and they want to stay in it” (p. 4). These are people who are intent on leading change but who also understand that they must tread with care in order not to endanger their organizational credibility. According to
Meyerson, tempered radicals include women who refuse to act like men in a male-dominated institution and people of color who want to expand their boundaries of inclusion in predominantly white institutions. In my pilot study, I found that the idea of a tempered radical resonated with my participants as women leading in predominantly male institutions within a predominantly patriarchal culture. Jones’ (2003) study with African American women educational administrators found that these women “had strong beliefs about what a leader ought to be, yet their values were often at odds with societal beliefs about what is thought of as leadership” (p. 189). That is, Jones’ participants were exhibiting tempered radicalism in order to stimulate change even though remaining within the organizations they wanted to change.

Tempered radicals work from within the system in order to positively change it (Meyerson, 2001). As leaders in organizations where others consider them deviant and different, such women exhibit and utilize certain strategies to survive, thrive and bring about change. As Meyerson observed,

Tempered radicals reflect important aspects of leadership that are absent in the more traditional portraits. It is leadership that tends to be less visible, less coordinated, and less vested with formal authority; it is also more local, more diffuse, more opportunistic, and more humble than the activity attributed to the modern-day hero. This version of leadership depends not on charismatic flair, instant success, or inspirational visions, but on qualities such as patience, self-knowledge, humility, flexibility, idealism, vigilance and commitment. And, although tempered radicals often act as individual agents of change, they are not lone heroes…they are quick to acknowledge they cannot do it alone (p. 171).
Researchers have found that of necessity, black women leaders tend to be tempered radicals, who attempt to act as change agents from within the very structures that otherwise happen to be inhospitable to them as individuals and as racial minorities (Alston, 2005; Jones, 2003; Meyerson, 2001).

**Servant Leadership**

The notion of servant leadership runs counter-culture as far as traditional leadership is concerned (Greenleaf, 1977). Greenleaf posited that his wish in conceptualizing the idea of servant leadership was that leaders would serve with skill, understanding, and spirit. For Greenleaf, greatness in leadership arose out of being a servant first. Greenleaf considered servant leadership as less coercive and more collaborative than the prevailing notions of traditional leadership. A servant leader does not withdraw from engagement with the system but rather critically engages the system in search of social justice. That is, servant leaders do not merely criticize corruption, injustice, and other structural evils; rather, a servant leader ponders what she can do about it and engages in action and advocacy. As Greenleaf observed, “criticism has its place, but as a total preoccupation it is sterile” (p. 11). Instead, servant leaders engage in creative achievement with an imperfect world. For Greenleaf, “the servant leader is servant first…It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead” (p. 13). Several researchers in the area of black women’s leadership have found that these leaders exhibited servant leader characteristics, such as deep spirituality, keen sense of vision and direction, strong sense of efficacy, dedication to community building, collaborative leadership styles, and commitment to their mission or calling (Alston, 2005; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Jones, 2003; Mabokela, 2003a; Murtadha-Watts, 1999).
Alston (2005) created a conceptual framework that would be appropriate in research on black women’s leadership consisting of tempered radicals and servant leaders. Murtadha-Watts’ (1999) study of black women’s leadership used the lens of spirituality to understand their experiences and tenacity in the face of racist and sexist discrimination. Both scholars used women’s experience as a valid tool towards theory creation and understanding of phenomena as explored by Black Feminist and Africana Womanist theorizing (Collins, 1996, 1998; Hudson-Weems, 1997). I combined and adapted the three sets of ideas for the conceptual framework for the present study as shown in Figure 1. Spirituality forms the foundation upon which life and leadership are experienced, understood and critiqued. It is the basis for the women’s choice or calling to become leaders, choosing their battles as tempered radicals, and serving the common good of the race or the community through a search for social justice.
Guiding Question

The guiding question for this inquiry is “what does it mean to be a female leader in an African context?” I developed my conversation probes to coincide with the women’s current experiences as a leader, their life prior to becoming leaders and their visions for their future as leaders.

Delimitations

1. I confined myself to interviewing and where possible observing sixteen women leaders in various organizational contexts.
2. The lack of prolonged engagement was a delimitation for this study. This is because the participants had extremely busy lives, and I had just over three months within which to carry out the localized fieldwork portion of my study.

3. I assumed that the experiences of a select group of women in Africa would inspire and be naturalistically generalizable for other black women in Africa and the Diaspora.

4. Even though other studies have explicated the challenges and travails that African women face, I choose not to focus on these women’s lives from a deficit perspective.

Limitations

The findings of a qualitative study such as this one can be open to other interpretations.

Summary

African women enact leadership within the context of imperialism, post-colonialism, economic dependency on the West, abject poverty for majority of the population, HIV/AIDS epidemic, government mismanagement of natural and national resources, and other predominantly African malaise. However, within that dismal context, I explored African women leaders’ use of Africana spirituality in order to enact leadership as servant leaders and tempered radicals. I ascertained and attempted to comprehend how select women leaders in an African context travailed through gender, traditional culture, organizational culture, social norm stereotypes and other constraints to their authority and leadership. In that way, I was attempting to add to a more complete picture of women’s leadership in general, and in Africa in particular, by contrasting the current deficit model using portraiture’s search for goodness, through stories of resiliency and success in spite of challenges and constraints.
Chapter 1 has provided a foundation, a contextual and conceptual framework under girding my study. In chapter two, I provided a theoretical framework in order to nest the present study within existing literature. Chapter 3 is the methodological framework, including my choice of research design, data collection and analysis strategies, and presented my self as research instrument. Chapter 4 provides a larger contextual framework, exploring the participants’ context of leadership, and introducing all the 18 participants (I included). Snapshots of eleven participants who formed part of the group of sixteen are also included in this introductory section. Chapter 5-10 are the portraits of the five main women leaders selected for in depth portraits. Chapter 11-13 is an introduction into the thematic analysis in terms of the main themes. Chapter 14 is a presentation of advice from the elders to current and future leaders. The final chapter is an exploration of future directions and personal resonance in terms of lessons that I have learnt through this process.
CHAPTER II: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The purpose of this study was to discover, describe, and understand women’s leadership in Africa, with particular attention to Nairobi. To accomplish this purpose, I have reviewed the literature relevant to a study on women’s leadership including:

1. Leadership Theories
2. Women in leadership
3. Black women and leadership
   - intersectionality
   - spirituality
   - mentoring
   - androgynous leadership styles
   - servant leadership
4. African women and leadership

I have provided a summary of the literature review and illuminated the gap in regards to scholarly studies on African women and leadership. Beginning with the broad arena of leadership theories, I have illustrated how women have been left out of the scholarly discourse on leadership.

Leadership Theories

The term leader often connotes imagery of powerful individuals commanding armies, powerful corporate chief executive officers, noteworthy (or notorious) national leaders, and inspiring individuals such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Mother Teresa. Leadership has been a subject of interest across history, even though research on the phenomenon did not begin until the 20th century (Yukl, 2001). Much of the research has focused
on determining factors leading to effective leadership such as traits, abilities, behaviors, sources of power, and or aspects of situation and how well a leader is able to influence followers in accomplishing a goal (Hersey, Blanchard & Johnson, 2001; Koestenbaum, 2002; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Rosenbach & Taylor, 2001; Yaverbaum, 2004; Yukl, 2001).

Different leadership theorists define leadership according to their individual perspectives and the aspects of the phenomenon that is of interest to them (Yukl, 2001). Bass (1990) conceptualized leadership as

The focus of group processes, as a matter of personality, as a matter of inducing compliance, as the exercise of influence, as particular behaviors, as a form of persuasion, as a power relation, as an instrument to achieve goals, as initiation of structure, and as many combinations of these definition.(p. 7)

These categories encompass traits, behaviors, situational, transactional, and transformational approaches to the study of leadership effectiveness. However, as Jones (2003) argued, leadership has historically been defined “from a monolithic viewpoint of androcentrically developed models where race and gender have been excluded from theories altogether” (p. 20). All the seminal studies conducted about leadership used white males as subjects, such that effective leaders were assumed to be confident, task-oriented, competitive, objective, decisive, and assertive (Heilman, 2001; Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2000; Wilson, 2004; Yoder, 2001; Yukl, 2001). This necessitated the inclusion of women and people of color in the debates and theorizing of leadership in the last three decades, with much of the research in the area being done in the 1990s (Adler, 1999; Astin & Leland, 1991; Lipman-Blumen, 1992).
Women in Leadership

Studies on women in leadership have shown that women continue to be under-represented in leadership positions in government, education, industry, and most other sectors of the economy globally (Adler, 1999; Alston, 2000; Cubillo & Brown, 2003; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Giesler, 2000; Heilman, 2001; Weiss, 1999; Wilson, 2004). In this section, I will explore the various theories that have been developed to explain the scarcity of women in leadership positions.

*Implicit Theories*

In traditional leadership theory, masculine attributes and leadership effectiveness often go hand in hand. Implicit theories that engender leadership as male may have been responsible for years of sex-based discrimination resulting in very few women ascending to positions of leadership, a situation often referred to as the ‘glass ceiling’ (Weiss, 1999). However, studies conducted in the last two decades have shown that traits such as interpersonal skills, concern for building cooperation, trust, and use of feminine behaviors such as support, empowering and caring, even though always relevant for leadership effectiveness, are now gaining currency due to the changing terrain of organizations (Yukl, 2001). Nevertheless, as Yukl and others observed, the belief that men are more qualified for leadership is still prevalent in many sectors. Yoder (2001), in her discussion on making leadership more effective for women, argued that leadership is gendered, and it is enacted within a gendered context. Leadership is gendered, such that competence is associated with masculinity, rationality, and whiteness (Chisholm, 2001; Parker & ogilvie, 1996; Yoder, 2001).
Stereotypes and Role Expectations

In the last decade, scholars interested in studying women leaders may be able to find more such leaders in education, government, not-for-profit, and industry. However, as Carli and Eagly (2001) warned, “Focusing on women who occupy such leadership positions should not cause us to forget that women have always exercised leadership, particularly in families and throughout communities.” (p. 629) However, women in public positions of leadership have historically been very rare. Carli and Eagly noted that historically, only 42 women had served as presidents of countries or prime ministers, 25 of whom came to office in the 1990s, and almost all the women in top corporate positions came into those positions in the 1990s.

In studies about sex role stereotypes, researchers found that although women could benefit from positive stereotypes such as being expected to be more considerate, negative stereotypes would override such benefits by considering them as too submissive and emotionally unstable on the one end or iron maiden, aggressive, and domineering workaholics on the other (Bass, 1990; Heilman, 2001). Gender stereotypes also affected how women and men were evaluated as leaders. If women exhibited masculine characteristics such as being agentic, they were negatively evaluated for violating gender prescriptions (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Heilman, 2001). One of the questions that arose from studies of women leaders is whether there exist gender differences in the way men and women lead.

Gender Differences in Leadership

The research on gender differences in leadership compared men and women in various leadership positions. Some compared men and women in laboratory settings, whereas others studied their leadership behaviors within organizational settings. However, disagreements abound about how to interpret the results of such studies (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001;
Yukl, 2001). Bass and Eagley and Johannesen-Schmidt in their meta-analyses of male-female differences in leadership styles discussed this disparity in interpretation, noting that even though some field studies showed no discernible differences, others conducted in laboratory conditions showed some differences. Some researchers had found that women are less coercive, less authoritarian, and less able to deal with interpersonal conflicts, more helpful, affectionate, open minded and accepting of blame than men (Lipman-Blumen, 1992; Pounder & Coleman, 2002; Ridgeway, 2001; Rigg & Sparrow, 1994). In most studies showing differences, women were reported as more consideration oriented, whereas men were more task oriented (Bass, 1990).

However, Bass argued that even though differences may be expected in the path to leadership, once men and women were in those positions, those differences tended to blur, suggesting that both use the same masculine styles. This seems to have been a general conclusion from many of the earlier studies, suggesting that for women to be successful, they had to lead like men. Bass recognized that because of the changing landscape for women and leadership roles, earlier research might need to be discounted. The possibility seems to be that differences between women and men are sometimes present, appearing and disappearing with shifting social contexts (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Pounder & Coleman, 2002). However, there was a need to study how women actually lead when they are in those administrative and executive positions.

**Women’s Ways of Leading**

Perhaps in response to the earlier conclusion that women had to acquire masculine tendencies in order to be successful as leaders, other researchers have explored women’s ways of leading, with the understanding that women can succeed as leaders by being themselves and utilizing their natural inclinations (Lipman-Blumen, 1992). Studies have also shown that even though women are in the workplace in large numbers, comprising almost 50% of the working
population, they are found in only a few occupations and lower paid ranks that are unlikely to lead managerial promotions (Bass, 1990). Women predominate in the teaching profession, but educational administrative positions remain the preserve of men in cultures as diverse as United Kingdom (Cubillo & Brown, 2003; Pounder & Coleman, 2002), Hong Kong (Shum & Cheng, 1997), United States of America (Young & Mcleod, 2001), South Africa (Chisholm, 2001; Mabokela, 2003b) and Kenya (Ombati, 2003). It seems clear to conclude that women are to be found in some leadership positions, albeit in limited numbers, but face many constraints to their ascent into any leadership positions.

*Other Explanations*

Other researchers have looked at these constraints to women’s ascent into positions of leadership, ranging from the aforementioned gender stereotypes, lack of mentors, inability to access important networks and competing demands (Carli & Eagly, 2001; Heilman, 2001; Muscarella, 2004). Yukl (2001) in his review of various studies on women and leadership also found that other explanations for gender-based discrimination and the glass ceiling phenomena have included:

1. Lack of opportunity to gain experience and visibility in types of positions that would facilitate advancement
2. Higher standards of performance for women than for men
3. Exclusion of women from informal networks that aid advancement
4. Lack of encouragement and opportunity for developmental activities
5. Lack of opportunity for effective mentoring
6. Difficulties created by competing family demands
7. Lack of strong action by top management to ensure equal opportunity
8. Intentional efforts by some men to retain control of the most powerful positions for themselves (p. 411-412) also see Bass, 1999; Ridgeway, 2001; Weiss, 1999 and Wilson, 2004.

Black female scholars assert that being persons of color and women compounds these barriers due to the intersection of gender and race as sources of oppression (Collins, 1999; Crenshaw, 1991); as such, black women are double minorities and make up a tiny minority in leadership positions (Alston, 2000; Jones, 2003; Murtadha-Watts, 1999; Parker & ogilvie, 1996). It then becomes necessary to study the leadership experiences of black women and to explore their survival and success strategy against social injustices wrought upon them by the intersection of gender, race, class, ethnic origins, nationality, and heterosexuality.

Black Women in Leadership

Studies about women in leadership have been comprehensive in both scope and methodology, but black scholars realized that the research leaves out women of color. Researchers have ascertained that black women represent a tiny minority in leadership ranks within educational institutions as well as in the corporate world (Alston, 2000; Jones, 2003; Morrison & Glinow, 1990; Parker & ogilvie, 1996). Themes emerging from the literature on black women’s leadership styles, practices and behaviors include androgynous leadership style, tempered radicalism, spirituality, mentoring, and a holistic servant leadership. Prior to elaborating on these themes, black women’s leadership must be understood within the context of black women’s standpoint and the resulting epistemology. This helps to understand black women’s leadership experiences against the backdrop of the intersection of at the very least, race and gender.
Black Feminist Standpoint and Intersectionality

The logic of standpoint theory in feminist theorizing emanates from the notion that women’s lived realities are overwhelmingly different from those of men, which results in epistemological consequences (Hartsock, 2004). From this perspective, Hartsock (2004) theorized that a standpoint is an engaged position, whereby the ruled or dominated group challenges the status quo and the perverse inhumanity of human relations. Patricia Hill Collins (1996), in her explication of a black feminist standpoint, maintained that black women’s economic status and experiences stimulate a distinctively black feminist consciousness; “A subordinate group not only experiences a different reality than a group that rules, but a subordinate group may interpret that reality differently from a dominant group” (p. 223). However, in academic discourse, subordinate voices are hardly ever welcome. In this context, black women’s knowledge claims are obscured and their knowledge production suppressed in order for the dominant group to maintain hegemony (Collins, 2000). Such women are faced with oppression and discrimination arising out of the intersection of race, class, and gender (Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1991). In spite of this domination, African women in the Continent and the Diaspora have managed to produce intellectual work, often aimed at fostering black women’s activism and a search for social justice (Collins, 2000; Dolphyne, 1991).

Even though African nations are supposedly enjoying freedom from colonial domination (Dolphyne, 1991; Oduyoye, 1995; Oyewumi, 2003), reality suggests that western domination continues through neo-colonialism and Africa’s dependency on the West for her economic survival as mandated by neo-liberal economic relations. As such, African women are a subordinated group as Africans in a white and West-controlled global economy, and as women within neo-patriarchal cultures (Collins, 1996; Dolphyne, 1991; Oyewumi, 1997, 2003).
Listening for their stories of thriving as leaders within that context becomes an important endeavor that allows for an African women’s perspective on leadership to emerge. Women in other social, political, economic and cultural contexts whose experiences mirror those of the participants in this study can learn from and be inspired by the thriving strategies of their African counterparts via naturalistic generalizations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983). Black and African women contribute to knowledge on leadership in context by referencing their experiences as situated knowers (Collins, 2000). Their narratives, understood through the lens of intersecting oppressions of racism, classism, imperialism, heterosexism, sexism, and ethnicism, help the researcher to illuminate theory and the reader to be educated about and enthused by the participants’ leadership experiences.

Spirituality

One of the most prevalent themes found in the literature about black women and leadership is the issue of spirituality. Religion and spirituality have been found to be important meaning-making and coping mechanisms for people of African descent (Dantley, 2003a, 2003b; Mattis, 2002; Paris, 1995). A spiritual foundation undergirds black scholars’ research, teaching, and thriving strategies in predominantly white institutions (Dillard et al., 2000; Jones, 2003; Lynn, 2001). In her study of black female educational administrators, Jones (2003) discovered that spirituality was a running theme emerging from each of her conversations with the participants as a way of life, as well as the driving force behind their leadership. Jones’ participants described spirituality in terms of the Golden Rule, leading from a sense of calling, and connecting with family, parents, teachers, and students in the school system.

Murtadha-Watts (1996), in her study of black women superintendents discussed how such women use their spirituality as a source of sustenance, survival, and resiliency in the face of
structural racism and sexism. Her participants discussed their roles as callings, as directed by divine vision, and talked about the need for their subordinates to exhibit a spiritual centering as well. The spirituality displayed and discussed by Murtadha-Watts’ participants involved risk-taking, critical evaluation of context and situation, and was expressed through activism against racism, sexism, and classism.

*Mentoring*

Another theme in the black women in leadership literature concerns mentoring; that is, the availability of mentors or lack thereof and how that impacted the women’s entry into and effectiveness in leadership (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Jones, 2003). Mentoring was found to be important in facilitating the professional development of African American women faculty, as well as increasing their representation in predominantly white universities (Tillman, 2001). Presence and promotion in institutions of higher education would be a prerequisite to African Americans’ advance into higher educational administration. As Jones found out, black women leaders found mentors in their female relatives such as mothers, grandmothers, aunts and *othermothers* who encouraged them to achieve beyond the expectations placed upon them by the racist structures. Black women leaders also found the stories of pioneer black leaders such as Sojourner Truth, Mary McLeod Bethune, Anna Julia Cooper, and others as inspiration for staying strong and being active in challenging the status quo. From the African continent, women such as the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner from Kenya, Professor Wangari Maathai and political leaders like Winnie Madikizela Mandela, Ellen Kuzwayo, and Wambui Otieno from South Africa and Kenya respectively serve as contemporary inspiring examples of challenging the status quo. However, very few such women leaders’ stories have been told beyond their
national borders, and the experiences of women leaders from Africa as a whole have not received much scholarly study (Bakare-Yusuf, 2003).

African Women in Leadership

Re-writing History

African women have been missing in the history of the continent for a long time, due to the incessant patriarchal structures that relegate their leadership activities to oblivion. For example, if Professor Wangari Maathai had not won the Nobel Peace Prize for 2004, it is unlikely that women outside Kenya would ever have heard or read her inspiring tales of fighting for the conservation of forests. Another example is the many women freedom fighters in African nations whose stories remained untold whereas men received recognition and honor for their role in the anti-colonial efforts (Baker, 1998; Kabira & Ngurukie, 1997; W. W. Otieno, 1998).

However, a few scholars have attempted to re-write history, to include women’s herstories in the bigger story of the continent’s struggle with external domination (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1997; Strobel, 1995; Sweetman, 1984). Sweetman (1984) scoured volumes of works on pre-historic Africa to gather portraits of African women leaders through the centuries. He chose to cast twelve portraits on women leaders as far back as ancient Egypt and Ethiopia. His choice was guided by the need to represent women’s leadership across the centuries, as well as portraits from all regions of the continent. Sweetman was of the opinion that even though men numerically outnumbered women in the story of Africa, the few herstories far exceeded the male stories in their extraordinariness. He concluded that historians under-estimated the roles that women played in leadership within Africa’s pre-historic, pre-colonial existence.
Life Herstories of Leading Women

Within the stories of colonial domination, women played an important role as participants and leaders in the freedom movements across the continent. One such leader, Wambui Waiyaki Otieno told her story in the form of an autobiography, relating her role as a spy for the freedom movement in Kenya. Wambui narrated the sacrifices she made and the risks she took as she carried out covert operations in order to keep the freedom fighters in the forests informed of the best strategies to take in their armed struggle (W. W. Otieno, 1998). Wambui’s life history is replete with examples of leadership during the armed struggle, and thwarted efforts at leadership post-independence. Whereas her class as an upper middle class woman allowed her to tell her story in the form of an autobiography, other female freedom fighters were relegated to oblivion (Kabira & Ngurukie, 1997). Wambui complained that she was asked for the names of fellow female fighters, purportedly to reward them for their labors as had been done for men, but that list was never used for that purpose (W. W. Otieno, 1998). As Kabira and Ngurukie found out when they interviewed six women freedom fighters, these women were not rewarded for their labor, and in spite of their tremendous leadership during the freedom struggle, they lived in abject landless poverty (Kabira & Ngurukie, 1997). For such women leaders of the freedom era, independence did not bring them the promised fruits, due to the fact that the change of guard replaced white domination with African class and patriarchal domination (Masinjila, 1997).

Whereas women like Wambui Otieno and Ellen Kuzwayo have managed to be recognized as leaders in the present African society, the story that remains to be told is how they survive with resiliency and resoluteness in spite of the challenges placed in their leadership path. Alison Baker (1998) in her study of Moroccan women who like Wambui and Kuzwayo participated in the nationalist and armed resistance movements, choose to approach her study
from a celebratory stance. She said, “The book as a whole is unabashedly celebratory. I like and admire these women, and I wrote to celebrate their extraordinary lives and contribution to the Moroccan independence movement.” (Preface) That is, Baker was interested in showing how the women leaders’ strength and fortitude in the face of national struggles contributed to their nation’s eventual independence from foreign domination. Such stories are rare.

Romero (1998) in her study of women in Post-Apartheid South Africa realized that one of the running threads through all the narratives she heard was a deep spirituality displayed through religious faith. She was of the opinion that this deep faith displayed by the women was actually typical of Africans as a whole, though it is particularly evident amongst the women. Romero observed that it is a source of resiliency and resistance in the midst of appalling economic, social, cultural and political deprivations. Women such as Ellen Kuzwayo, Wambui Otieno, and others with them may have utilized their spirituality and deep religiosity to overcome great hurdles during years of imprisonment, struggle and strive as a leader in the anti-apartheid and anti-colonial efforts. As Kuzwayo (1985) noted, South African women showed outstanding tenacity against terrible odds, and remained determined, like the women in the African communities of previous generations, until they won a right to enjoy their nation free of white domination. Kuzwayo’s autobiography is a story of strength and tenacity through many decades of apartheid and the ensuing economic, political, social and cultural marginalization of black Africans in South Africa. These life herstories demonstrated women’s ways of leading in the context of African realities. Nevertheless, such stories have remained untold denying women leaders and leadership scholars everywhere a chance to enrich leadership theories and models. Below are some examples of African women leading in various capacities within different sectors, such as education, politics, and the non-governmental sector.
Leading in Education Administration

Women in Africa have consistently been under-represented in educational achievements and access, such that very few women reach college level. In her study of college students in Kenya, Tabitha Otieno (1995) found that such women are faced with near-insurmountable obstacles in their pursuit of higher education. These barriers included lack of financial resources, cultural traditions where boys are valued more than girls, and competing demands (T. N. Otieno, 1995). She gave questionnaires to over 200 college and university women students and found that their ability to be in those institutions of higher education were dependent on having a supportive family background as well as academic excellence. Such women form a small minority representing less than 20% of total university enrollments. When they do enter higher education institutions, they are overrepresented in teacher education, nursing, secretarial and humanities. Once women are marginalized from achieving higher education, it follows that they would be under-represented in positions of leadership requiring college degrees.

Amongst elementary school principals, Victor Ombati (2003) found that though women make up almost 60% of the teaching force in two school districts, they only represent 45% of principals in those districts. His study did not extend beyond two urban districts and it would have been revealing to find out how they fare in rural districts as well as the national averages. Ombati triangulated data collection methods by employing interviews, focus groups and observation, and concluded that patriarchal culture forms the greatest hindrance to women’s accent to educational leadership. Favoritism, lobbying and informal networks formed the methods of accent on the educational leadership ladder, thus excluding women who did not have powerful networks (Ombati, 2003).
In her examination of academic women, one researcher discovered that education was a double-edged sword; on the one hand, it allowed such women to gain social status, but also creating contradictions in their personal lives (Kamau, 1996). Kamau interviewed 24 women academics in different universities in Kenya, who assured her that education in Kenya perpetuates gender inequalities. She found that the colonial education system in Kenya served to produce subservience, uncritical obedience, Judeo-Christian moral uprightness and compliance to cultural gender stereotypes that place women in subjugation to men. Kamau discovered that this was a legacy of colonial education, an education that presented women as ignorant gossips in need of moral regulation, thus making it fairly difficult for educated women to collectivize and organize to agitate for better working conditions and promotions (Kamau, 1996). Academic women found universities to be harsh working environments, where their gender and marital status continued to serve as dividing factors, and where tenure and promotion into administrative positions was extremely difficult.

In South Africa, one researcher interviewed six women administrators in institutions of higher education, women who referred to themselves as ‘donkeys of the university’ (Mabokela, 2003a). As donkeys, such female administrators felt that they were charged with challenging responsibilities but denied the respect and recognition due to their positions. Mabokela found that such women administrators struggled with being the first or the only woman to hold such a position, such that though not necessarily positioned as tokens, they felt their minority status in predominantly male institutions. Mabokela argued that chronic under-representation put such women under constant scrutiny by men as well as women; creating psychological pressures to succeed that involve working very long hours. Similar pressures were evident amongst the academic women studied by Kamau (1996) in Kenyan universities. Such women experience
resistance from both men and women, because both expect leaders to be men rather than women. As such, women leaders complained about what they referred to as the ‘pull her down’ attitude that they experience from other women (Mabokela, 2003a). For South African women leaders, they also struggle with the intersection of race and gender due to that country’s history with apartheid. In addition, African women leaders struggle under the constraints imposed by class, where they feel resented by other less accomplished women, yet they earned their current elite status through academic and professional accomplishments (Kamau, 1996; Mabokela, 2003a).

In her study of gender and leadership in South African educational administration, another researcher explored the lived experiences of both men and women in order to explicate the conflict between social goals and practices (Chisholm, 2001). After interviewing eight women and eight men educational leaders across racial groups, Chisholm felt that leadership is associated with masculinity, rationality and whiteness in South African educational administration. Chisholm realized that many of her black interviewees experienced race and gender as intertwined and inseparable elements, such that those who were both black and female faced the most constraints to their leadership and authority.

Women educational leaders and academics in both South Africa and Kenya were constantly having to prove their worth, and sometimes struggle with doing all the work and receiving none of the credit (Chisholm, 2001; Kamau, 1996; Mabokela, 2003a, 2003b). It is no wonder they referred to their lot as donkeys, beasts of burden that receive neither thanks no praise for their labors within the higher education institutions. It becomes increasingly clear that women in leadership positions in Africa as represented in the few studies reviewed struggle under challenges and constraints to their leadership and authority, in a process of intersection amongst several variables; African culture and traditions, gender, race, and organizational
cultures consisting of invisibility and lack of recognition. Such women struggled with the competing demands of domestic labor and public life, since the women carried the bulk of the childcare and domestic responsibilities (Chisholm, 2001; Kamau, 1996; Mabokela, 2003a, 2003b). What are missing are studies that explore how such women succeed and thrive in spite of all the challenges and constraints whether these are cultural, organizational, racial, gender, economic or otherwise.

Summary

Studies on leadership theories explored how leaders lead, and the traits, styles, behaviors, practices, power, and sources of influence they use to engender goal accomplishment (Bass, 1990; Hersey et al., 2000; Yukl, 2001). However, such theories have been criticized for using white males as their subject of study yet generalizing theory to all leaders everywhere. That is, most leadership theories are andocentric and missed out on women and people of color from the theory formulation (Jones, 2003). As such, women responded to this androcentricity by engaging in theorizing on women’s leadership, ranging from differences in styles, practices, and behaviors between men and women (Bass, 1990). However, such studies were not conclusive as to whether men and women do indeed lead differently, with some researchers arguing for differences, others contending for similarities, and yet others recognizing the role of context or situation in moderating women’s leadership styles (Bass, 1990; Carli & Eagly, 2001). Other studies on women and leadership were concentrated on understanding the role of gender stereotyping on the evaluation of women as leaders, with a recognition that such stereotypes prescribe how women leaders are evaluated by their constituents (Heilman, 2001). These studies had concentrated on the leadership of white women, such that women of color were missing from this form of theorizing.
In response to their missing in theory, black women researchers contend that even though black women are under-represented at all levels of leadership, where they do lead, their styles are androgynous (Parker, 2005; Parker & ogilvie, 1996). In addition, certain elements are evident in their leadership experiences including profound spirituality, servant leadership, tempered radicalism, a need for mentors, and androgynous styles of leadership.

Women are under-represented in all arenas of public leadership in African nations, ranging from education, politics, business and public administration. Common amongst both African and African-American women leaders is the notion of the intersectionality of oppressive forces acting against them including race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality. Some researchers discussed how women are under-represented in educational access as well as educational administration (Chisholm, 2001; Mabokela, 2003a, 2003b; Ombati, 2003; T. N. Otieno, 1995). The few studies available on women’s leadership in Africa discussed the constraints and challenges that such women face. Such challenges included: (a) Conflict between their private/domestic roles with their public roles as leaders; (b) race and class biases; (c) challenge to their authority as leaders in contexts of patriarchal worldview; (d) lack of recognition and visibility within their organizations; and (e) the paradox of education where other women resent them for their achievements and attempt to pull them down (Chisholm, 2001; Kamau, 1996; Mabokela, 2003b; Ombati, 2003). Lacking in the discussions of African women’s experiences is an exploration into the survival and success strategies of existing women leaders within these contexts. The current study will explore, discover and attempt to understand how select women leaders in an African context transverse gender, traditional culture, organizational culture, social norm stereotypes and other constraints to their authority and leadership. In that way, it will be possible to have a more complete picture of women’s
leadership in general, and in Africa in particular, by contrasting the current deficit model with a search for goodness, through stories of resiliency and success in spite of challenges and constraints.

In conclusion, it is imperative to have studies of African realities, in this case, African women in leadership carried out by African scholars, that can be included in the global debate on leadership studies. Theory is used cautiously because it “almost always privileges a western reading of African realities. This often ends up with a gloomy picture of misery, hopelessness, abuse, mutilation, prostitution, and disease” (Murunga, 2002). This is a risk even when the researcher is African, due to the legacy of colonial and neocolonial education. However, as Oyewumi stated, it is necessary "to interrogate gender and allied concepts based on African cultural experiences and epistemologies. ...the goal is to find ways in which African research can be better informed by local concerns and interpretations and at the same time, concurrently, for African experiences to be taken into account in general theory building, the structural racism of the global system notwithstanding" (Oyewumi, 2002). For this study, the focus will be on the positive stories of resiliency and strength nestled within the complexities, challenges and contradictions of the women’s experiences of leadership in context.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, I will explain my choice of qualitative research methodology and expound on portraiture as a data collection strategy. I will also further explain my role as the researcher as well as discuss known trustworthiness and ethical issues.

Rationale for a Qualitative Study

The area of women’s leadership in Africa has so far been under-researched, such that it became necessary to start by talking with current African women leaders in order to find out their experiences and begin the process of placing their leadership within the existing knowledge base. In order to tell the stories of African women leaders, it is necessary to listen to them, observe them as they carry out their leadership responsibilities, observe how others react and respond to their authority, and ground their leadership within their particular context. The central issue is to identify how these women interact with their work, how they experience and understand their world, how they feel, what they believe as well as how they explain structure and relationships (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2000) within the African male-dominated leadership scene (Mabokela, 2003a; Nzomo, 1997).

Qualitative inquiry is a situated activity carried out in a natural setting to explore social or human problems (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). It involves the construction of a holistic depiction of a phenomenon through observation of participants, detailed views of participants gathered through interviews and conversations, and use of symbols, written documents, pictures, and other available materials (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Maxwell, 2005). Qualitative researchers attempt to understand human and social issues by making sense of personal stories (Glesne, 1999).
Qualitative investigation is guided by the interpretivist paradigm, which understands reality as a social construct that is dynamic and complex (Glesne, 1999). Interpretivist researchers not only recognize the social construction of reality, but also stress that researchers interpret the participants’ interpretation of that reality. That is very important in a study that is aimed at exploring how women leaders understand and interpret their experiences of leadership within the African context. The reader is reminded that both the portraits and the emerging themes that will form the findings chapters of this study will be my interpretations of the participants’ stories.

The qualitative methodology utilized in this study is one geared towards not only advancing the academic career of the researcher, but also contributing to the lives of the participants, if only by having their voices heard beyond their cultural and national boundaries. I employed Portraiture, which is a qualitative research design modeled upon ethnographic and phenomenological traditions (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Portraiture

The few studies that have been conducted about women in Africa reflected limited information on the leadership and experiences of African women as a group, and even less about their individual experiences. They enumerated the challenges that women face as they attempt to advance career ladder, especially in the educational arena in African countries, but researchers such as Ombati (2003), Mabokela (2003a,b), Kamau (1995) and Otieno (1995) did not explicitly define how individual women navigate those challenges. This study adds to the literature individual women’s narratives of resiliency and strength in the face of intersecting hindrances to their success as leaders (Mabokela, 2003a; Mama, 2002). As Mama (2002) observed, African
women leaders have made tremendous progress in their endeavors to emancipate themselves and their fellow womenfolk.

In this qualitative study, I used Portraiture as my central biographical approach. Portraiture as defined by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) seeks

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

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

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

As noted above, portraiture is rooted in phenomenology, which is “an examination of how people think about and interpret their own experiences” (Lynn, 2001). This is an important element in studying leadership as experienced by African women because the participants had the opportunity to be actively involved in co-creating their stories by confirming some of my early interpretations of their life herstories. Portraiture also includes a description of context, in order to situate the phenomena under study in specific historical, national, cultural, political, social and economic settings. Lawrence-Lightfoot describes context as a rich resource for the researcher’s interpretation of the participants’ thoughts, feelings and behaviors about a particular phenomena (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983).

Portraiture is concerned with coherence, with creating authentic narratives based on the belief that narratives and stories are valid structures though which peoples identities are formed and shared (Collins, 1998, 2000; Davis, 2003). Davis (2003) noted that the narratives in portraiture are useful tools for understanding how participants and the researcher make meaning in their lives. Jones (2003) observed that “portraiture’s holistic core defies the androcentric view of analyzing research about black women from the deficit model by shifting away from primarily negative participant experiences” (p.70-71). Instead, portraiture is a search for goodness as
opposed to a deficit model based on identifying problems and narrating pathologies (Davis, 2003; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

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

Researcher Predilections

I was the primary instrument for this study, where I interacted directly with the women in the study, choosing how a particular line of inquiry would offer promise for answering the research questions at hand, determining moment to moment how to behave, what to notice and what to record (Locke et al., 2000). It was necessary for me to acknowledge my predilections and recognize how my identity has impacted the direction and process of the inquiry (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000; Glesne, 1999; Janesick, 2000; Jones, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2000). I am a Kenyan born in the central province of the country, raised by a high school principal father and a primary school teacher mother. I have spent the last several years in either some form of leadership training program or actual leadership positions. I have worked in schools, in churches, as a general manager in charge of Human Resources in a business organization, and as a sales manager in retail. My work brought me face to face with the challenge of finding good leadership in education, churches, non-governmental organizations, government institutions, and
the private sector. I concluded that one of the problems facing Africa in general and Kenya in particular is a dearth of good leadership. Thus began my interest in the field of leadership studies.

In relation to women, I have constantly faced challenges to my authority as a leader by virtue of being a woman. I have been in a position where my youth, unmarried and childfree status worked against my getting a promotion where essentially, I would have been an ideal candidate. I was informed that I could not be a school principal for a school I had worked diligently to bring to reality, and this became my first blatant experience of sexism. I also watched other women struggle with sexism apparently derived from an abuse of traditional cultures, denying them human and property rights, access to education and resources, and the respect due to their positions of leadership. I therefore come to this study with a particular interest in learning how the women selected lead on a daily basis, how they face challenges, how they make decisions, and how they manage to thrive and succeed in their particular cultural environment.

I recognize that my axiological assumptions and political thinking informed my choice of problem to study, my methodology, the questions I asked, my data gathering and data analyzing strategies, and all other aspects of my research journey (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). As an African womanist and/or Black feminist, it is of particular importance to me that I represent African women accurately, as well as resist the deficit model that has been used to study them in the past. African women have been described as helpless, marginalized, traumatized victims of war, disease, poverty and patriarchy, and denied of basic human rights (Murunga, 2002). However, there remains an untold story, one of resilience and strength in spite of those seemingly insurmountable challenges (Baker, 1998; Tamale, 2004). As a researcher, I chose to tell that
untold story and to include my lived experiences and subjective presence as I co-create and interpret the narratives of African women, as my political act against epistemological domination (Fine et al., 2000).

The Stance of Child/Servant Researcher

One of the challenges facing the Kenyan researcher is the government’s changing attitude towards researchers. This situation arose due to the Kenya government’s view that Kenya as a country is over-researched, based on the sheer numbers of local and foreign researchers carrying out studies in the country (Mbugua-Muriithi, 1996). As Mbugua-Muriithi (1996) observed, that leads to the question of the role of the Kenyan researcher. She conceptualized that important role thus:

The role of the Kenyan researcher is that of accurately reflecting the reality of the people whom he or she is studying…The Kenyan researcher is in charge of translating the people’s experiences, interests, significant concerns and living situations … through prior research training, has the responsibility of carrying out research practices which translate the actualities of the peoples lives in the appropriate terminology. Another role that the Kenyan researcher may play is that of the professional “knower” enacting both a surveillance role and that of producing knowledge that feeds into the discursive practices of the people of issue under study. (p. 59-60)

As a Kenyan researcher, I took this charge rather seriously. I wanted to represent the women leaders’ experiences as accurately and authentically as feasible and to bring to light their narratives in order to contribute an African women’s perspective to the literature on leadership.

Even more critical to this particular study was the realization that my age, gender, social class status, educational attainments, and experiences had a major hand to play in how successful
I would be in gaining access to the participants. By this, I mean, as a young, unmarried woman who has no children, my status in Kenyan society is somewhat ambivalent. Whereas on the one hand there is an expectation that I would be successful and ambitious because I do not have too many hindrances from family, it is also expected that when I approached the women leaders, it would be as a child attempting to engage her elders in conversation in order to learn from them. That is, in Kenyan society, in spite of the many signs of modernity, tradition still dictates that a young person should treat her elders with utmost respect. As such, age is revered; age and experience held in high esteem. In addition, the culture of patronage, where a younger person has to be introduced into society by an older, respected and credible person played out in the need for me to have a liaison. As such, I approached this study from the standpoint of a young woman leader who is respectful of her elders’ attainments, achievements and experiences, and would benefit from learning from them. Furthermore, amongst most African communities, the quest for knowledge, especially when that quest leads to a young person seeking out her elders, is regarded with goodwill. Elders traditionally were always at hand to give advise to young people, as such, seeking out the women leaders as elders from whom I could gain life and leadership wisdom was the appropriate stance to take. This approach was very successful, the women opened up about their lives, their experiences, their successes and failures as women leaders in a patriarchal society where public leadership is dominated by men. They also took the time to instruct me, to give me ideas about how I could succeed as a woman leader, taking on another of the traditional roles that women played in African societies: the role of educators, transmitters of cultural knowledge from one generation to the next. In addition, they included changes to my methodology, which I respectively obliged, specifically in asking that I bring some of my friends to listen in to the focus group discussion.
Participants

Negotiating Access

Reverend Joyce W Kariuki acted as my liaison, helping to introduce me to several of the women leaders and to make important contacts for me. She is my mother’s younger sister, and as such introduced me to the women leaders as her daughter, as is common in my ethnic Gikuyu culture: my mothers sisters are my *maitu munyinyi*, literally translated as ‘young or small mother’. In the African cultures age is revered, status is highly recognized: had I tried to do this on my own without a recognized patron, it would have been very difficult to get access to the women leaders.

Rev Joyce is in her mid-forties, an ordained minister in the Anglican Church and a university lecturer. She is also a community leader, and is well respected in the area of counseling and HIV/AIDS training and advocacy. In addition, she has a private office where she does consulting, and this was my office for the three months I was in Nairobi. She and I had discussed the criteria for selecting possible participants for this study, and she actually introduced me to the second participant for my pilot study. I made use of her recommendations to choose participants, most of whom she had held discussion with about the possibility of their involvement in the study. This served as my introduction to the women leaders from someone whose leadership credibility they trust. It also ensured that I would not need to spend too much time negotiating access when I got to the field.

Participant Characteristics

The participants for this study were purposively selected through personal recommendations of my key liaison as well as the recommendations of the oldest participant, Mrs. Muthoni Likimani, as one who at eighty years of age, knew who in society is regarded as a
credible women leader. The women selected for this study were: (a) At least 40 years old, (b) at least 10 years leadership experience, (c) institutional entrepreneurs or organizational leaders, (d) black Africans, and (e) engaged in social justice leadership. All the participants except one were Kenyans by birth, the other one was a Sudanese who resides in Kenya.

_Pseudonymity_

I had proposed that I would use pseudonyms for all my participants as is usually recommended in social science research, and was intending to invite the participants to choose a name for themselves. This is in keeping with the importance of naming in African traditions, where names are considered as self-fulfilling prophecies and as a form of retaining connections between the living and those who have gone before them (Paris, 1995). I did suggest to them that I use their cultural names, which for most African ethnicities involve being referred to as the mother of a first-born child. In that way, they would have retained their identity even in their use of pseudonyms. However, all sixteen women quickly pushed aside the idea of using pseudonyms. They felt that it was important for them to use their real names in the study, to own their stories because these stories are important to them. They felt that they wanted to be identified with their stories; otherwise using pseudonyms would mean that they were afraid of something or needed to hide something, which they insisted was unnecessary. Actually, some of them expressed surprise and even anger that I would even suggest that they use a pseudonym. In respecting their wishes to be identified with their stories, I have used the names of the participants as they gave them to me. I did however make sure that they saw their complete transcripts in case there was anything they had said that they did not want me to use in the study.
Other Ethical Issues

I received approval for research with human subjects from the Human Subjects Review Board at Bowling Green State University prior to engaging in any data collection. This helped ensure that the participants were protected and no harm befell them because of participating in my study.

Another ethical issue for researchers interested in conducting studies in Kenya is the acquisition of a government license to conduct research in Kenya. I was able to acquire this within the first week of arriving in Kenya, without any hiccups or hindrances. The only requirement was that I send them two copies of the bound dissertation within two years of graduation. This is to make the dissertation available to a Kenyan audience by placing it in the resource center at the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology offices in Nairobi.

Related to ethics is the issue of confidentiality. I used Rev Joyce’s office as my office for the duration of my stay in Nairobi. I used the office mainly for purposes of making phone calls and appointments. I had a lockable file cabinet into which I stored all my notes, memos, documents, artifacts, and transcripts, audio and video tapes safe. I am the only one who had access to the key for this cabinet in order to keep the participants information safe and secure. Upon my return to the US, I kept the same materials locked in my file cabinet at my university office. I will retain this information post graduation safely locked up for five to seven years, upon which I will destroy the original tapes and transcriptions.

Beyond document and tape storage, I also assured the women that I would not divulge any information that I consider sensitive, and any information that they may have disclosed to me but that they requested that I not include in my portraits. Alongside this, I sought each participant’s consent to audio tape the interviews and to both audio and video tape the focus
group, and informed them that I would be using excerpts of their stories in my dissertation as well as in other educational publications and presentations. I had the women read and sign a consent form to this effect. The consent letter and consent form are provided as appendices.

Data Collection

*Biographical Questionnaire*

At the initial meeting with each participant, I provided them with a biographical questionnaire (appendix C), consent letter (Appendix A) and the consent forms (Appendix B). In addition, I attempted to get an interview date set with their gatekeepers, that is secretaries or personal assistants. This initial meeting was a chance for us to get to know one another, to establish parameters for the study, and to organize our diaries in recognition of their busy schedules and my limited time in the field. None of the sixteen participants filled in the biographical questionnaire; being members of an oral society, they preferred to tell me that information rather than write it down. In addition, they filled in the consent forms only after I convinced them that I needed them to show the Human Subjects Review Board at my university that I had complied – they were more than willing to tell me their stories and were not afraid that I would cause them any harm, something I took as a sign of trust.

*Participant Observations*

The data collection strategies included participant observation, where possible, as I sought to observe the women leaders at work and in other relevant social contexts. Relevant social contexts might include their homes, women’s group meeting, fellowship meeting, activism or advocacy group meetings, lecture sessions, seminars, and any other areas where the women participate as leaders. For those that observation was possible, I observed them at work while I was waiting to speak with them, or as I was having a conversation with them the kind of
interruptions that they would allow, and others I met with them in their homes. It was interesting to see their interactions with peers, constituents, superiors, and domestic help as a source of information on the character of their leadership.

_Face-to-Face Conversations_  

The second but most important strategy was in the form of face-to-face conversations, guided by the research question and the protocols developed along the lines of the conceptual framework. I had planned for up to three interviews, the first of which would have been on the leader’s past as a leader, the second on her present leadership, and the third on her future or vision for leadership. However, the women leaders had such busy schedules that three different times for face-to-face conversations were simply not feasible. In addition, after the first few, I realized that the women leaders told me everything I needed to know in one intense conversation. As such, I had one lengthy and detailed interview per leader, and a subsequent conversation in which I would give them the transcript and ask any follow up questions. I tape recorded almost all the interviews, and transcribed the tapes verbatim. I took copious notes during the interviews, thought I was careful not to be so busy writing notes as to miss the non-verbal communication. I also recorded my thoughts during observation exercises. I kept a research journal, in which I write self-reflective essays and daily observations, ruminations as well as questions for further clarification.

_Documents and Artifacts_  

In addition, I made use of any available written materials such as newspaper articles about the women leaders, their own written documents, brochures, books, and informational resources concerning their organizations. I also viewed any available audio-visual materials that were available, such as news items and interviews that had been done on the women by the
media. After returning to the United States, I attempted to look up the women on the internet, to seek for either information they had written such as journal articles and speeches, or materials written about them by others everywhere. Internet sources also provided information about meetings that the more global of the leaders had attended, speeches they had made or important comments they had contributed to debates. Such was the case for Wahu Kaara on World Social Forum and Global Call Against Poverty Campaign meetings, Dr Agnes Abuom on World Council of Churches meetings, and Dr Esther Mombo on Ecumenical and other ecclesiastical meetings.

Focus Group

I invited all the participants to participate in a focus group meeting as the final phase of the field-based data collection. However, due to their rather frequent local, regional and international travels, only three women leaders were available to meet on the day assigned. Fortunately, the three that were available to meet with me were also among the five who would later form the key portraits. This focus group meeting served as a way for me to elucidate and make meaning out of tentative themes that had emerged through the iterative process of data collection and data analysis. I provided the participants with transcripts for review, presented to them tentative themes in the form of statements (Appendix E), and dialogued with them (Jones, 2003). This focus group also served as a group reflection on gender, culture and leadership as experienced by the participants.

Most importantly for my study, the focus group was an opportunity for the older women leaders to interact with each other and with younger women leaders. This took place because as soon as I invited them to participate in a group event, they requested that I bring along a few of my friends who were women leaders in their thirties to the meeting so that they too could ask
questions and be given advise on how to survive and thrive as women leaders in Kenyan society. Whereas the women leaders concentrated on discussing the probes that I had provided, after they had discussed the probes they asked the younger women to talk ask any questions that may have risen as they listened to the discussions. This intergenerational focus group was also a reflection on the communal element of African culture, whereby the elders felt that they should not be speaking to just one young leader. Instead, I should be willing to share them with my friends so that there would be the beginning of a critical mass of young women leaders who can take over from them when the time comes. They felt that having a focus group where only elders and myself were present would be selfish hoarding of knowledge; on the positive side, they felt that this would be an opportunity for me to reciprocate by enabling them to meet such young women leaders to initiate mentoring relationships. The women leaders who participated in the study were Priscilla Nangurai, Wahu Kaara, and Muthoni Likimani, as well as Reverend Joyce, the liaison. They enjoyed this encounter so much so that they kept on saying; “we need to do this again”.  

Data Analysis Procedures

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

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

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

Next, I organized the categories more systematically through axial coding, where the original categories were condensed into fewer and more precise categories (Creswell, 1998; Jones, 2003; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). I used a second reader and methods professor to affirm my thematic categories by talking through the themes with them and attempting to clarify the categories I had applied. This process was very useful especially as the data turned out to be so thick, it was necessary to have a second set of eyes to confirm or disconfirm some of the
sub-themes that I came up with to support and or expand the initial conceptual framework. I made use of the readers’ recommendations to clarify or condense the themes. This second reader is a doctoral student as well as a Kenyan woman who is familiar with the culture and context. She was very helpful in helping me translate some of the language and to explain the names of various historical figures that participants mentioned throughout the conversations that would make sense to her and to me but not to a non-Kenyan audience.

The search for emergent themes was guided by five modes as suggested by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997)

1. Listening for repetitive refrains that appear persistently amongst the participants and that suggest a communally held view
2. Listening for resonant metaphors, cultural expressions, and symbolism that reveal the ways participants make meaning of and live through their realities
3. Listening “for themes expressed through cultural and institutional rituals that seem important to organizational continuity and coherence” (p. 193)
4. Use different sources of data including the conversations, observations, and documents, that is triangulation of data sources
5. Construct themes and reveal relationship among perspectives that are often experienced as divergent and cacophonous by the participants

Strategies for Increasing Trustworthiness

Maxwell (2005) provided a checklist of measures to assure trustworthiness including intensive involvement, rich data, respondent validation, intervention or effects of researcher on participants, seeking discrepant evidence, triangulation of data sources, quasi-statistics and comparison. I have already talked about my predilections as a researcher and shown how these
have affected my choices of research subject, methods and data collection process. In that section, I also clarified how my experiences as a woman and as a leader have influenced my current affinity to studying women leaders. These predilections also impacted the choices I made in terms of what to include and what to exclude in the drawing of the portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). For instance, as a matter of political choice, I am interested in stories of resiliency and success through a search for goodness rather than a recording of pathologies of women’s leadership experiences. I have also decided to include my voice as a participant-observer, as a witness to the women’s experiences, and as a co-portraitist along with my participants in order to reduce the infamous power relations often present in researcher-subject relationships (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

In order to develop exhaustive portraits of the participants I relied on measurers of credibility, authenticity and the hermeneutic process to steer the selection of appropriate data sources (Jones, 2003). Credibility has to do with whether the explanation fits the descriptions (Janesick, 2000) provided by researcher. That is, confidence in the explanations given as truthful and fitting the data. Credibility of the inquiry process was assured by my intimate engagement with each participant in the field, observations of the participants where these were appropriate, using a variety of sources for gathering data and peer review (Creswell, 1998; Glesne, 1999; Maxwell, 2005). As mentioned before, my peer reviewer, a fellow African woman was instrumental in this process. She read each transcript and each portrait that I created for the five main participants, and helped me clarify some of the language, names and events that would have been unclear to non-Kenyans. She was also very helpful in letting me know whether my portraits authentically and truthfully represented the participant, and enabled me to fill in some gaps in the portraits to ensure that they represent the essence of the participant. I also had a
second peer reviewer, an African immigrant who is not of Kenyan descent, who helped me clarify themes and illustrate them appropriately. I spent just under four months in the field, most of which was spent conversing with, observing or collecting archival data from the participants. As one who is intimate with Nairobi’s urban culture, transport system, government bureaucracy and cultural relations between the young and the older generations, I wasted no time acculturating, and I was able to commence data gathering immediately upon arrival.

Authenticity has to do with whether the research process was dependable and faithful to the participants, the context and whether the data thus gathered is truthful (Creswell, 1998; Janesick, 2000; Miles & Huberman, 1994). To assure authenticity, I made use of at as many data sources as were available including interviews/conversations, documents, appearances of the women leaders on the media, and participant observations all of which enriched the data. In that way, it was possible for me as the researcher to corroborate my data using the various sources. I also assure greater authenticity by the idea of having the participants as co-researchers; together we will reflect on and learn from their experiences. The participants were actively involved telling their stories and corroborating some of my initial themes, which helped to enhance my interpretations. In addition, as noted before, the peer reader helped a great deal in ensuring that what I said in the portraits was representative of the transcripts, that I remained as faithful to the raw data as possible. In places where she was not sure, I had to prove the authenticity of the portrait by drawing from my field notes and the documents to enhance what the participants had said, or further clarify some of what they had said in our conversations.

The hermeneutic process refers to the interpretation of the data. I supported the information gathered through interviews with my observations of the participants and archival data in order to provide thick and rich descriptions(Creswell, 1998; Davis, 2003; Maxwell,
I requested the participants to read their transcripts as a form of member checking or respondent validation, which is a type of analyst triangulation (Creswell, 1998; Jones, 2003). This allowed the participants to authenticate my interpretation of their experiences and serve to enrich the hermeneutic process. I did make use of my dissertation co-chairs as reviewers and methods experts, as well as an outside mentor unconnected to my study as external auditor who gave tremendous insights and offered constructive critique (Creswell, 1998). In addition, the focus group was a sort of member checking and validation or disconfirmation of emerging, because my probes were statements that had come up several times in conversations with the women leaders. Some of those statements were deconstructed for me, as the women argued amongst themselves as to whether they indeed represented the situation as they understood it. For instance, the statement ‘leadership is dominated by men’ resulted in the women reframing and re-defining leadership to show that what many men practiced was not leadership; it was rule by domination or what they called rulership. As such, the final product is a better thought out representation of what it entails to be a woman leader in the African context.

**Narrative Structure**

In order to understand the lived leadership experiences of the participants, I provided contextual information including a description of Nairobi city relevant to the study, an explication of cultural, social, political and economic elements of import to understanding the women’s experiences, and each woman’s organizational setting. I also provided demographic information about the women such as age, marital status, educational level, leadership position, and organizational memberships.

Two products are presented as part of the findings from this study, portraits and themes. The first sets of portraits are snapshots of the eleven participants plus the liaison. Due to the need
for precision and conciseness, and the length of engagement with each participant, I did not provide their full portraits. The second set of portraits are more in-depth, covering the history of each of the five women leaders selected with whom I spent considerable amounts of time in individual and group conversation, and who also best illustrated the main themes of tempered radicalism, servant leadership and spirituality. I was listening for a story, not to a story, which involved taking an active role and becoming part of the story (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). As an introduction to each story, I provided contextual information that will aid the reader in understanding the narrative. Portraitists choose elements to include in the introduction to the research portrait in order to set the stage for what is to follow, by placing human experiences within a particular social, physical, historical and cultural context (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The information provided as context is aimed at clarifying details of the portrait and the researchers interpretation of the phenomenon being studied (Davis, 2003; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). As Davis (2003) suggested, “contextual details help the reader see and understand the action and structure at the portrayed site” (p. 203).

Following the example of Jones (2003), I wrote each of the in-depth individual portraits in its own chapter for the five key participants, whereby I introduced each woman and narrated her story. I included relevant information regarding each woman’s experience of leadership expounding and illustrating those experiences by way of extensive use of the individual participant’s own words. In crafting the stories, I made choices about what to include or exclude to aid both the empirical and the aesthetic considerations in producing a coherent whole. The struggle involved what Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) described as “the dual motivations guiding portraiture: to inform and inspire, to document and transform, to speak to the head and
the heart” (p. 243). The purpose of producing portraits is to illuminate leadership by conveying how it is practiced and experienced in a particular context.

The second product was a thorough exploration and explication of the themes that emerged from the data that illustrated and or expanded upon the conceptual framework. Each component of the conceptual framework was given its own chapter, because I did a thorough job of illustrating the various sub-components or themes that best explain the main theme. Following Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997, p.263)), this section will look something like:

1. Main Theme, for example, Tempered Radicalism – one of the components of the conceptual framework
   a. Relevant dimension 1 – for example, ‘leveraging small wins’
      o Evidence – these would be quotes that directly relate to the relevant dimension.
      o Evidence
      o Evidence
      o Dissonance – this would be a quote that shows that though all the participants seem to be agreed, there are areas of disagreement and divergence. A quote illustrating such a divergence would be necessary in illustrating the possible double-sides of a relevant theme, if available.
      o Relevant dimension 2 for example, ‘collective action’
      o evidence
      o evidence
      o evidence
      o dissonance
2. Theme 2 (and so on).

This generic structure provided me with a schema for assembling and organizing the parts of a coherent whole, such that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Davis, 2003; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). I found this schema useful in visualizing the display of emergent themes so that the reader can easily decipher patterns that emerged out of my analysis and interpretation of the data.

Preliminary Pilot Findings

I conducted the pilot study during the weekend of March 5, 2005 in New York City. The two participants selected for the pilot were attending the 49th Session on Gender organized by the United Nations. Both participants are women leaders from Kenya. The pilot study confirmed the usability and viability of my conceptual framework consisting of Africana spirituality, tempered radicalism and servant leadership. They also added a dimension that I should focus on during the fieldwork, which is the notion of mentoring. They both felt that this was an important element in a study of women’s leadership experiences in Kenya and suggested that I both find out how my participants have been mentored and whether they mentor others. After participating in the pilot study, Rev Joyce agreed to become my key liaison, to introduce me to potential participants as well as act as my patron or sponsor amongst the leaders.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to discover, describe and understand African women’s leadership via a select number of women leaders based in Nairobi or its environs. I employed a qualitative methodology, using portraiture to guide the research process. Through portraiture, I attended to resonance by choosing particular stories and convergent themes as part of the gestalt (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). By resonance I mean the threads that when spun together,
contribute to the whole. That is, stories and quotes illustrating themes for which the reader’s response should be ‘yes, of course’ (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Resonance is an empirical requirement, that is, themes must be illustrated and shown to have emerged from the data. I also attended to coherence, which is an element of aesthetics, in showing the relationships of the various parts to each other (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). I described the contextual details that enrich the readers’ comprehension of the phenomenon. I also utilized my voice as witness to the phenomena, as interpreter of the women’s stories, and in dialogue with the women on leadership experiences. My voice is also included in this methodology chapter via my short autobiography in order to explain how I came to be interested in studying women leaders and how my familiarity with the context enhanced and facilitate the research process.

The data collection procedures involved triangulation of sources including a biographical questionnaire, conversational interviews, participant observation and documents. Triangulation of data sources aided in enriching the trustworthiness of my study. I requested my participants to read their transcripts in order to validate my data collection, as well as my interpretation of their stories. I consulted two peer reviewers and my dissertation co-chairs as well as an external auditor to validate my interpretations and coding schemas.

The final products were individual portraits as well as three chapters explicating the triad of tempered radicalism, servant leadership and spirituality as demonstrated by the participants. Whereas I had purposed to concentrate on the narratives of five individual women leaders, I ended up conversing with and collecting data about sixteen women. As such, I provided short herstories of eleven of the women leaders, and five in-depth portraits. In addition, I provided thorough explication of the elements of the conceptual framework utilizing the themes that emerged to support and expand that framework. The purpose of the study was to provide readers
with a new perspective on leadership as experienced by African women in Kenya. The current study explored, ascertained and attempted to comprehend how select women leaders in an African context transverse gender, traditional culture, organizational culture, social norm stereotypes and other constraints to their authority and leadership. Through the study, I have contributed to a more complete picture of women’s leadership in general, and in Africa in particular, by contrasting the current deficit model using portraiture’s search for goodness, through stories of resiliency and success in spite of challenges and constraints.
CHAPTER IV: THE SETTING

In this chapter, I introduce the geographical location, cultural, social and economic context, and snap shots of participants involved in this study. The contextual information is necessary for the reader to get a visual and sensory idea of where the women live and lead, the conditions under which they exist and lead, and how these help shape their leadership experiences.

Geographical Location

I conducted the fieldwork portion of this study in or around Nairobi, Kenya amongst African women leaders. Nairobi is the capital city of Kenya, it is situated between Maasai land plains and the central Kenya highlands. Nairobi is one of the largest cities in Africa, and has a population nearing four million as of end of 2005. It is densely populated, averaging 1,700 people per square kilometer. It is the center of industry, commerce, education and entertainment in Kenya as well as the eastern African region. Due to the peace that Kenya has experienced since independence, Nairobi is not only home to Kenyans but also to a large refugee community from Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia and Democratic Republic of Congo. It is also home to many other people from around the world because several United Nations Organizations have their headquarters in the city. It is described as a cosmopolitan and multicultural city that is home to obscene riches as well as extreme poverty; 70% of Nairobi’s inhabitants live in the Slums, squatter settlements of the urban poor.

Nairobi is also a favorite destination for both local and international visitors: for locals, rural-urban migration in search of greener pastures; for international visitors, work in the many international organizations or leisure, including Nairobi national Park, the only park of its size
located adjacent to a city. Nairobi is the center of government business. Nairobi borders Maasailand to the south, Ukambani to the East, and Gikuyuland to the North and west. It is described as ‘the city in the sun’ because of its moderate weather: temperatures range between 54 - 80 F year round and rainfall is moderate too. The only face-to-face conversation that took place outside of city limits was in Kajiado, a town just outside of Nairobi in the heart of Maasailand where Mrs. Priscilla Nangurai, one of the participants resides. For the focus group, Ms Nangurai met the rest of us in Westland’s, Nairobi, at the All Africa Conference of Churches where Rev Joyce has her private office.

Socio-Cultural Context

Africa is a continent that has undergone many cultural changes in the last century. Most important of these changes was precipitated by the dual forces of colonialism and Christianity. Most of the participants in this study were born during colonial times, and have memories especially of the emergency period in Kenya when the colonial government issued a state of emergency as they attempted to stamp out a revolutionary war. Fortunately, for Kenya, the colonial forces did not succeed and had to give Kenyans their independence eventually. The emergency period was in 1952-1960, and the British awarded Kenya self-governance in 1963. As such, there are several references in the portraits and in the quotes utilized to illustrate themes that refer back to this period in Kenya’s history as it was a very traumatic experience for the nation as a whole. Most of the references to this period are in relation to women’s participation in fighting for freedom and their survival mechanisms against innumerable odds.

Upon attaining self-government, the country was led on a path towards success before corruption, mismanagement of government resources, intolerance of government leaders towards dissenters, and global economic relations drove the country towards a path of destruction. In the
first decade and a half after independence, Kenya experienced tremendous growth economically, socially and culturally with the growth of two universities, several mid-level colleges, hundreds of high schools and thousands of primary schools. However politically, autocratic leaders were at the helm of government. This period saw the killing of various political leaders because of their anti-government ideas including Tom Mboya and J M Kariuki. The period also saw the rising of a political class that would do anything to attain power and wealth, amassing large tracts of land in central and Rift Valley for themselves. Upon the death of the first president in 1978, the new government came up with what was called the Nyayo Philosophy: Nyayo means footsteps – this new government literally followed the negative directions that had been put in place. The period 1978 to 1992 has gone down in history as one of the worst for Kenyans because of the intolerance of the former president Moi government to any dissent, and the growth of corruption to disastrous levels. The women leaders make many references to this period because they rose into leadership during this time, especially as they felt compelled to fight for social and political justice. Some of them faced many perils during this period because of their attempts to stand up for what they believed in.

In 1992 after a very active period of dissent and political unrest, former president Moi finally allowed for the change in the constitution to allow Kenya to return to being a multi-party state after ten years of de jure single party status. General elections were held at the end of 1992 that saw several women become elected members of parliament; the two political leaders interviewed for this study were among them. This period ushered in chaos and uncertainty, hope and jubilation as the young democracy emerged, with many in opposition leadership attempting to figure out what their roles were as critics of government. Now there was freedom of speech, assembly, and all other freedoms that had been tampered with during the prior period. It was
during this period that the leadership of many of these participants matured. The ruling party KANU managed to remain in power for ten years, in which time opposition leaders and those in civil society engaged in active critic of the government leadership, enabling Kenya to emerge as a democratic nation. In 2002, the then opposition parties formed a coalition to enable them to present a united front in the general elections. The strategy worked, and the political women leaders in this study became members of the governing cabinet for the first time. In 2002 government also began a process of constitutional review that was open to representatives from civil society, grassroots organizations, educational institutions and all other important social entities in the country. Again, most of the women leaders in this study participated in this process and referred to it severally. However, the draft that they produced that is referred to as the Bomas Draft or the People Driven Constitution failed at the referendum because Members of Parliament messed around with it, to the people’s dismay. The MPs were apparently afraid of the change in status quo which might have resulted in a lose of power for some of them. As such, at the general referendum, the Draft was defeated with a resounding majority because most people felt it was no longer representative. This took place in November 2005, after the completion of my fieldwork. However, it is important in understanding many of the statements that the women made in relation to their participation in the Bomas Draft before MPs mangled it out of shape and in understanding the important contributions that these women leaders have made in the making of Kenya’s history.

Another important cultural note is the fact that Kenya is an emerging democracy run through a representative parliament, and it is showing signs of modernity in many sectors. However, traditions still reign supreme. These traditions have undergone transformation due to the impact of global economy, such as the introduction of money economy to communities that
originally practiced batter trade. Education, Christianity, traditional religions, and other social constructs play an important role in how women experience life and leadership. Both tradition and modernity co-exist as uncomfortable bedfellows, creating a state of flux where many of the norms now adhered to are neither genuinely traditional, nor authentically modern (Gyekye, 1997). This is important as a background against which some of the social justice activism of the women leaders can be understood, especially where it relates to access to resources for marginalized populations. In the next several pages, I introduce the participants of the study giving a short narrative about each one of them because in the thematic analysis, I used all sixteen participants plus my liaison and myself.

Introduction to Participants

This study consisted of eighteen participants, starting with myself as researcher, my liaison or co-researcher and sixteen women leaders situated in or near Nairobi, Kenya. In portraiture, the researcher brings herself into the study in the various roles of witness to the events, and interpreter of the events and stories presented by the participants. In addition, as the researcher, I participated in dialogue with the participants and co-created the narratives from conversations, observations and documents presented by the participants, through a process of interpreting those data and making sense of them. I also engaged in a process of discerning the voices of the participants as individuals, as well as attempting to discover their collective voice. My autobiographical heritage as an African woman who has prior leadership experiences in Kenya prompted my quest to learn from the elders’ wisdom and life stories. In addition, my role as a former church minister who has been very critical of the gender discrimination found in many Christian churches prompted me to learn from those who have succeeded in that arena. I am also a former schoolteacher and educational institutional entrepreneur, thus the desire to want
to learn from those in educational administration, especially those whose work revolves around social-educational justice. It became apparent then that my personal background had an impact in the choice of women who participated in the study. However, my liaison also had a great hand in shaping the study, because she introduced me to most of the women who were possible participants for the study, most of whom she knew fairly well. We made cold calls of introduction to those participants that Rev Joyce did not know personally. However, because of the respect given to ‘people of the cloth’, especially those from traditional denominations in Kenya, each time she called and requested a chance for us to introduce the study, they would grant her an appointment. Had I attempted to do this on my own as an unknown young female student, I would have had limited success. I therefore start the introductions of participants with Reverend Joyce W Kariuki, my aunt, mentor, friend, and greatest supporter in this research journey.

Reverend Joyce W. Kariuki: Anglican Church Clergywoman, Independent Consultant Gender, Development and HIV/AIDS

Reverend Joyce participated in the pilot project that I undertook while I was attempting to define the parameters of my study. Through that pilot project, she got excited about the study and began to brainstorm with me on possible participants. The names we came up with covered the length and breadth of women in leadership as far as we could imagine, educational, political, ecclesiastical, and the Civil Commons. She knew many of the women were personally, some we met while in the process of seeking appointments with others. For example, whereas Muthoni Wanyeki and Rev had met in prior NGO engagements, Njoki Wainaina was a new find for both of us. Rev. Kariuki is a sort-after speaker in churches and NGO forums as well as in schools and colleges where she talks about issues relating to HIV/AIDS, women in leadership, and
counseling. Her training is in biblical counseling from Nairobi International School of Theology. She is also an adjunct lecturer at Daystar University where she teaches classes on counseling, leadership, small business management and entrepreneurship. She worked at the Central Bank of Kenya prior to starting a supermarket and later on, embarking on the ministerial path. Her networks permeate the NGO world where she is involved in women’s networks for peace, reconciliation, and HIV/AIDS training, advocacy and care. The choice of participants does somewhat reflect her institutional and ministerial backgrounds. However, they go beyond that to women in politics, which happens to be one of her future goals; to join political leadership and perhaps became a parliamentarian.

It is important to point out that the women’s positions of leadership and context of leadership are current as of September 2005 when I had the last face-to-face conversation. The sixteen participants were distributed across several sectors: two in government, four in education, one in business and all others in the civil society including law, human rights, gender, religious and development areas. Five of the participants were between the ages of 41-50, eight were between 51-60 years of age, two were 61-70 and the oldest was 80 as of September 2005. In terms of experience, most of them had been in leadership positions for over 25 years. Two of the women leaders were single, 3 were divorced, 9 are married, and 2 are widowed. All except one participant have children, most of whom are adults. In the next several pages, I will introduce the eleven women leaders for whom I did not create in depth portraits due to space and time constraints. I begin the snapshots by introducing the political leaders.

**Honorable Beth Mugo: Assistant Minister for Education, Kenya Government**

One could say that politics runs in the blood of Honorable Beth Mugo, Kenya’s Assistant Minister for Education. This is because Honorable Beth Mugo began life as the daughter of
middle class parents in the mid 1940s and is the niece of Kenya’s first president, the late Mzee Jomo Kenyatta. Her story is riddled with anecdotes from her experiences being connected to the first family of Kenya prior to and after independence. For example, she talked about how her educational experience was marred by discrimination from missionaries because of her uncle’s involvement in the freedom movement in Kenya in the 1950s. In the seventies while her husband was an ambassador, she and the family traveled around the world in Kenyan mission abroad. At the same time, she engaged in entrepreneurial undertakings and traveled with the first lady, Mama Ngina Kenyatta around the world. In the eighties after the family’s return to Kenya, she began to be involved in the women’s movement, particularly as the Kenyan women prepared for the end of the UN Decade for Women Conference held in Nairobi in 1985. Afterwards, her involvement in women’s issues led to engaging in political leadership as the Member of Parliament for Dagoretti, one of the constituencies in Nairobi. Her first cabinet appointment was in 2003 when the then opposition parties took over Kenya’s political leadership after winning the 2002 general elections. She has been the Assistant Minister for Education in charge of basic education, a challenging role because the new government introduced free primary education without the necessary human or capital resources to implement it.

Honorable Charity Ngilu: Minister for Health, Kenya Government

Honorable Charity Ngilu is referred to as Mama Rainbow because of her role in helping forge an opposition parties’ alliance, or Iron Lady due to her unflinching political stands. Hon Ngilu has been a member of parliament since Kenya’s first multi-party elections of 1992 when she was only 40 years old and with no prior public leadership experience. Her prior experience includes being a secretary at the Central Bank of Kenya, and later a businessperson. Her motivation for seeking public political leadership was the conviction that as a woman, she would
be an effective representative of both women and the poor; she quoted the proverb that says ‘it is the wearer of the show who knows where it pinches” to justify her decision. She became a part of government in 2003 after the then opposition parties became the ruling coalition government after winning the 2002 general elections. She was given the docket of health minister, a responsibility that her many critics did not expect her to manage especially with the malignant tumor of rampant corruption plaguing that ministry. However, in the 2 ½ years that she was minister prior to this interview, Honorable Ngilu had experienced both success and failure. One of her most public failures came when her bill for provision of free public health fell through after repeated battles with several political bigwigs. She had been involved in public battles with the then minister of finance when he said that the bill was too ambitious; the government had no money to fund it. She was of the opinion that the government had money, but preferred to spend it on luxury vehicles and weapons of war that the country did not need instead of serving the needs of the poor who make up 56% of Kenya’s population. Eventually, the president vetoed the bill just before it became law, publicly squashing any hopes that Hon Ngilu had for providing accessible and affordable healthcare for the poor. On the other hand, she has been able to access funding from the Bill Clinton Foundation and the Global Fund towards fighting HIV/AIDS, and providing affordable anti-retroviral drugs. In addition, she has been able to reopen several public hospitals that had been rundown through corruption and mismanagement in the previous regime. However, if the many strikes and threats of strikes by medical personnel are anything to go by, her ministry continues to be one of the most volatile government ministries in Kenya, and her limited success is actually commendable in that context. Hon Ngilu is married and has three grown up children, she is in her early fifties.
Reverend Judy Mbugua: Continental Coordinator for PACWA

Rev Judy Mbugua was one of the first women to be ordained within mainstream denominations in Kenya after a long struggle to convince her male-dominated church leadership that it wasn’t anti-biblical to do so. She was born in central Kenya of middle class parents in 1957 but her story is dominated by both struggle and persistence. In what she described as a foolish move, she quit school at 16 then promptly fell pregnant. Two years later, she was married with two kids, no job and no education. After five or six years of struggling and five children later, Rev Mbugua decided enough was enough. “I was fed up with failure, I was fed up with poverty, I really didn’t want to stay there”, she said. She completed high school through correspondence and undertook vocational training in copy typing, secretarial and later administrative skills. As her career progressed, she felt compelled to begin a fellowship for women like herself, women who at that point in time were not included in church activities because whereas they were married, their husbands did not attend church. Through her own experience of exclusion, she invited women to meet in her home. In a short time, no home was big enough to accommodate them so they needed to use church facilities. At the time of writing, they had just acquired land and built a fellowship hall that could accommodate three hundred people. Due to her work in this women’s fellowship aptly named ‘Ladies Homecare Fellowship’, she was invited to pioneer the Pan African Christian Women’s Association by the Association (PACWA) of Evangelicals of Africa in 1990 where she is the Continental Coordinator. Rev Mbugua’s work and ministry revolve around empowering women economically, educationally, legally and spiritually so that they can be able to uplift their families. She is of the conviction that poverty is not a virtue. She has had many fights along the way, fights with herself, fights with the church, and struggles with finding acceptance as a woman leader. She epitomizes a
spirited radical servant – humble enough to serve and empower others, yet strong enough to persist through struggles and challenges.

*Prof Faith Nguru: Director of Research and Consultancy, Daystar University*

Prof Nguru is a 1995 Alumnus of Bowling Green State University having attained her masters and Ph.D in Mass Communication from the School of Communication Studies. Whereas some of the other women leaders told elaborate tales of their experiences of gender discrimination, Prof Nguru felt that she hardly faced any. If anything, she felt that being a highly educated woman at Daystar University, a Christian Liberal Arts Institution was a distinct advantage because she was often the only one in a room full of men; as such, she would be given many roles to play and used these to advance, bypassing the glass ceiling in the process. When I met Prof Nguru, I was struck by her humility and sweet personality, she is one of those people others describe as genuinely good, including her former professors at BGSU. However, that sweet spirit belies a woman of amazing stamina, strength of purpose and stupendous commitment to the mission of education for emancipation. In her professional capacity, she is an associate professor of communication studies, and the director for Research and consultancy at Daystar. In her personal capacity, she is the wife of the University’s Vice Chancellor, who is also an ordained minister making her a ministers wife, roles that necessitate a willingness to serve at any time. She and her husband started an elementary school in their rural village to provide values-based education to children from the village. When I asked her how she manages all these roles, she said that it takes a lot of prioritizing and sacrificing – a major sacrifice being the lack of time for personal social activities. However, these are sacrifices she is willing to make because she needed to concentrate on being a professional, a minister’s/vice chancellors wife, a
mother (she has a five year old) a step-mother (her husbands first wife died eight years ago) and
a step-grandmother. Hers is the epitome of a very tempered radical and willing servant leader.

Njoki Wainaina: Gender and Development Consultant

Njoki Wainaina is the 65-year-old immediate former director of African Women’s
Communication and Development Network (FEMNET) which she helped pioneer in the late
eighties. She has been involved in gender and development work since the early seventies and
was able to narrate the progression of the women’s movement in Kenya from 1973 to the
present. She attended the global meetings in 1975 (Mexico City) 1985 (Nairobi) and 1995
(Beijing), as well as every regional meeting held in that period. On a personal front, she talked
about how she has learnt to be more tempered with age, saying that her earlier ‘independence at
any cost’ philosophy was flawed. Instead, she argued me as a young woman leader to learn to
move from independence to interdependence through use of negotiation and dialogue tools. Ms
Wainaina ascribed her zeal for gender and development work to having been brought up in a
family where all children were regarded as equal, a very radical idea in those days:

I am the person I am because my parents gave us equality. I don’t know where it came
from at their time but we were brought up equal. We were given equal opportunities with
our brothers. And I talk about feminism and I say my father was the first feminist that I
knew. He believed in women, he fought for women; he gave up all that we longed to give
to the girls. That is why my work in gender is not an option, it is a heritage.
However, she recognized that patriarchy was so strong that even though she and her
siblings grew up in the same home, her brothers treated their wives in more chauvinistic ways.
As such, she argued that gender roles socialization has created and sustained the disparities
because both women such as her brothers’ wives and men support the status quo. She talked
about spirituality being the basis for her zeal for gender equality – all men and women are
created equal. Njoki Wainaina is a wife, mother, and doting grandmother even as she now
engages in business, her ‘retirement career’ and continues to serve as a gender consultant.
Lynne Muthoni Wanyeki: Executive Director of FEMNET

When Ms Wainaina retired, she handed over the reigns of FEMNET to a young radical feminist called L Muthoni Wanyeki who at that point was in her mid thirties. Six years later, Ms Wanyeki talked about her frustration with being an administrator in a hierarchical institution, one that she found that way and has not been able to change because the board consists of older women who aren’t as willing to change. She had a real hard time accepting that she is a leader, as far as she is concerned, she is simply an administrator. However, through dialogue, I helped her recognize that her positional leadership has given her a national, continental and global platform upon which to express her ideas about gender equity and development. She is a highly sought after speaker in the Non-Governmental Sector on issues to do with gender, development and human rights, and she also writes a weekly column for the East African, a regional weekly paper. As such, she began to see her role as not only an organizational leader but also an opinion leader in matters related to her work. Ms Muthoni also discussed the way racism is experienced in Kenya, arguing that it is so subtle yet so powerful and it goes unrecognized.

I think it’s far more than we know. Its something that is so constantly with us that we don’t, we don’t even name it. For instance the reaction we have towards Kenyans of south Asian descent, very real anger and rage and not look back to how they too as a migrant community here were forced into a colonial set up. The fact that they were in business was a colonial design, they were allowed to be in business Africans weren’t. They weren’t allowed to be in agriculture, Africans were. You know, and I think you live with that kind of antagonism … You contrast that with people we should have a lot more anger against, the settler community, and we don’t. Actually we still are trying to emulate them, we don’t talk about the fact that huge tracts of land are still under settler ownership and control, we don’t talk about how they perceive us…yet almost everything about what we aspire to is shaped by our wanting to be like them.

Her values of communalism, collectivity, and dignity for all set her apart as a servant leader, albeit more radical than most. However, she too has learnt to become tempered especially in her current role recognizing that her position opens doors for what she described as real social
transformation; therefore she needs to stay within her organization even as she attempts to change it and to change society. She is also more attuned to racial issues in Kenya having undertaken her undergraduate and graduate studies in Canada. Whereas in Kenya she was privileged by her status as a biracial upper middle class woman, in Canada, she discovered her blackness and African identity. The values she espoused are a product of her self-definition as an African woman who has attempted to discover, through working with rural women and in women’s and development work, what it really means to be an African woman. As the youngest participant in the study, she was more disillusioned than the others, frustrated not only by her status as a woman in a patriarchal culture, but also her position as a woman who is considered young in a society that privileges marriage and children. She however still held tenuously to the possibility of social transformation and worked tirelessly to contribute to it in her position and as a media personality. Her training is in political science, and she hopes to spend more time on writing in the near future.

**Judy Thongori: Human Rights Lawyer**

Ms Thongori was born in the mid-sixties and had a middle-class upbringing. She attended some of the most prestigious girls’ schools in Kenya both because her family could afford the tuition costs and the fact that she was a very bright student. She joined Nairobi University’s School of Law whereupon she discovered that she was very competitive, and enjoyed being an opinion leader. After law school, she worked a short stint in the Attorney General’s Chambers, where she felt rather restless.

I remember praying to God many many mornings that God give me a purpose for life. I couldn’t have spent that much time studying only to come and hang my court behind the door as happens in government employment.
That is when she quit government to embark on a lucrative corporate law career. She worked for a prominent East African Lawyer called Lee Muthoga whereupon she said:

It was the greatest thing to happen in my life. It has propelled me to where I am because he taught me a lot in terms of humility, in terms of honesty as you serve your clients and making your clients very central. And even in terms of using the law to change peoples lives. I worked for him then moved on to another law firm. From there I went to FIDA and worked for awhile there. I had made a career in private practice, in cutthroat litigation, then it was commercial law. And that point because I didn’t understand, if people didn’t pay loans I felt it’s because they didn’t want to. So sad really.

Restlessness with the status quo and needing to do something that has little to do with money led her to again quit private practice to work for Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) Kenya chapter. In her new role as deputy director, she utilized the lessons Lee had taught her about humility in using the law to serve people, more so women who were struggling under human rights abuses. Five years of work at FIDA brought her face to face with poverty and the effect it has on illiteracy, including legal illiteracy. With her newfound knowledge, she returned to private practice of family law and human rights law whereby 10% of her practice is devoted to pro bono work for the poor and the marginalized. Her future dream is to return to Law School for masters so that she can become a law lecturer, and to do some writing around women and human rights laws in Kenya. She is married to John Thongori, a fellow lawyer whom she described as supportive of her legal justice activism; he provided the bulk of the families needs while she was working for FIDA, and they have two children.

Honorable Eunice Ole Marima: Community Development Expert

Honorable Eunice Ole Marima is the minister for Nairobi North in the Shadow Women’s Cabinet, a group dedicated to righting the wrongs in the current government through engagement and critique. For the last thirty years or so, she has been challenging cultural biases against Maasai women and girls, empowering them with economic skills and self-improvement.
capabilities. She is a formidable grassroots leader who only began to gain some national limelight as the chairlady of the *Maendeleo* Caucus, an organization formed with the aim of re-organizing the largest women’s organization in Kenya, *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake* (translated as Women’s Development Organization). She is a retired Marketing and Public Relations Officer for World Vision, a job she left after 15 years in order to concentrate on community development. Her current work is purely voluntary and unpaid, but she said she does it because she loves it, she enjoys seeing the transformations that empowering women can bring upon the community:

> So I have been with those women, which was very easy because I was giving them knowledge, which they appreciate, because I believe in lifting them up. That was not so much of a challenge because the only thing I was encountering was the illiteracy rates. They could not read and balance their books but they are very good upstairs, actually somebody can track her own money.

Hers is an uphill battle because of the combination of high levels of illiteracy amongst the Maasai, social norms that discriminate against women and girls, and limited financial resources. But she is a resourceful woman and a creative problem solver: she started a self-help group, a rescue center for girls running away from forced marriages and female cut, as well as her involvement in politics as ways to solve her community’s problems.

> Reto in Maasai land is help, it’s like self-help. I brought in the aspect of self-sustenance. While still at Reto, we are still addressing the same issues of health, education, and actually we made education the key thing.

Mrs. Ole Marima has two diplomas, one in Public Relations and Communication, the other in Law (a diploma in the Kenyan education system is equivalent to an American associate’s degree). She has made it a goal in life to emancipate Maasai women through increasing access to education. She is married to Hon Ole Marima, a former Member of Parliament for Narok, and they have five grown up children and two grandchildren.
Mrs. Shiprah Gichaga: National Coordinator, Forum for African Women Educationists

Mrs. Gichaga was born in the late forties. She recounted her experiences of the emergency period that was instituted by the British colonizers during Kenya’s fight for freedom. She particularly remembered how her mother had to single-handedly feed the children, take them to school, ensure that there was food growing in the field, and participate in forced labor. She gave credit to her mother for persevering with educating the daughters because she had to fight against so many odds, least of which was community pressure not to bother educating girls. At this time when she was struggling with raising and educating the family, Mrs. Gichaga’s father had been placed in detention by colonial forces as they attempted to stamp out resistance to colonial domination, as were most men in Gikuyuland. Having observed this phenomenon, Mrs. Gichaga grew up recognizing the important roles that women played. She made up her mind that she was going to work really hard to get an education seeing as her mother had given her all she could for a good start in life. She undertook a bachelor’s degree in education; only after graduating did she agree to get married and raise a family. Her career began as a geography and religious studies high school teacher for 16 years, after which she was promoted to the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MOEST) Inspectorate division. Here she rose through the ranks, being promoted four times to senior inspector of schools before she opted to move on to FAWE. She began doing FAWE work at her MOEST gender and guidance and counseling desk for two years prior to actually having her own organizational offices. She has been at FAWE officially since 1998. FAWE’s mission is to educate women and girls for development. The problems arise from cultural attitudes that degrade women and girls to second status, or in some cultures, commodities that could be used for barter trade. As such, her work at FAWE has revolved around working in communities where girls are particularly vulnerable to increase their
access, retention and performance in educational settings. In particular, she has been involved in coming up with interventions and programs that reduce the gender gaps in educational access, retention and performance especially in science, math and technical subjects. Mrs. Gichaga felt that she faced minimal gender-based discrimination; rather, her biggest struggles revolved around managing being a wife, mother, responsible member of the community alongside her career aspirations. She gave up social pleasures such as attending weddings or having coffee with her friends because she was simply too busy; a sacrifice she was willing to make to ensure that girls achieve their potential by giving them opportunities for their development. In her time as National Coordinator, she also squeezed in a Master’s in Counseling from the University of Durham in the United Kingdom through distance learning – she does describe herself as a life long learner. Her leadership is guided by values such as humility, empowering others, encouraging and enabling those she works with to achieve their highest potential.

Ms Anisia Karlo Achieng: Founding Executive Director, Sudanese Women’s Voice for Peace

The soft spoken, tall and stately Ms Achieng is a Southern Sudanese woman in her mid-forties, a separated mother of two blood children and one adopted son. She resides in Nairobi having left Sudan due to the 21-year long civil war that only ended in early 2005. She lost both of her parents when she was young, her mother when she was less than a year old, and her father a little later on. As such, she was raised in an orphanage by missionaries, her other siblings were taken in by relatives. Due to the outbreak of civil war in southern Sudan, the missionaries relocated to Uganda and that is where Ms Achieng had her secondary education.

While she was still in school in Uganda, Ms Achieng insisted that the missionaries allow her to return to Southern Sudan to look for her relatives; she did not appreciate living as an orphan because as an African, she felt that those who raised her siblings would appreciate
reconnecting with her. This served as the beginning of her challenging the status quo by seeking
alternatives to the structures that were presented as normative. She said that the nuns were
attempting to direct her towards becoming a nun, but that was not her calling. As such, after
secondary school, she returned to Southern Sudan and tried her hand at police training and
nursing before eventually choosing to engage in social work with Norwegian Church Aid.
However, the war in Southern Sudan again forced her out, this time she moved to Nairobi. At
first she volunteered for United Nations Higher Commission for Refugees, which rather than pay
her, paid for her tuition at Catholic University of Eastern Africa where she pursued a Bachelors
Degree in Social Work. At this point, she was a full time student, a young mother, a wife and a
volunteer for UNHCR, something she said required amazing adeptness at juggling. Upon
completion of her studies, she found it difficult to find a job. Rather than sit on her laurels, she
got together with other women to figure out what they could do about educating their own
people, as well as other Africans struggling with internal conflicts, about war and peace. After
studying the conflicts in Sudan and other parts of Africa, the women realized that in all those
cases, the decision to go to war were made by men, leaving women out, yet women paid the
highest price: displacement, attempting to support their men at war, war crimes such as rape and
physical violence, etc. With her leadership, Sudanese Women’s Voice for Peace was instituted to
seek an alternative. She has given speeches, lectures, and consultation to various groups and
organizations, including grassroots women’s organizations involved in seeking peace for their
communities. She undertook various training programs in conflict resolution, non-violence,
women and development, and leadership to become as competent as she could be in her role as a
peace builder and peace trainer. She believes that her faith has helped her weather many storms
as she has sought to serve as a peace builder, and has given her convictions and values that she
uses in being a leader. Her future vision includes graduate level education in peace building, conflict resolution or non-violence, and seeking electoral positions in the new Sudan. She also continued to be very involved in the peace process in Sudan seeing as conflicts continue to plague the country, especially in Darfur, and to support the reconstruction efforts in Southern Sudan.

Dr Jennifer Riria: Chief Executive Officer, Kenya Women’s Finance Trust

Dr Riria is the fiery and feisty CEO of Kenya Women’s Finance Trust in her mid-fifties who has held that position since 1992. She was born in Meru on the Slopes of Mount Kenya in the Eastern Province of Kenya. She described her father as a man committed to educating his daughters in an era when this was counter-cultural, something she attributed to his being a Christian. She was of the opinion that Christianity brought new values, and she is grateful that she and her sisters did not have to face circumcision. She received her undergraduate degree from University of Dar E Salaam in Tanzania, her masters from England, and PhD from Kenyatta University (KU) in women, education and development. She worked as an assistant professor at KU before joining United Nations Children’s Fund for a three-year stint as a women and development consultant.

On arrival at KWFT, Dr Riria found a micro-credit institution in the red, but she was able to turn it around to profitability. She described her early years as a training ground because she was a non-financial manager who had to quickly learn banking and finance. She did so well that she has been a board member, even the chair of several financial institutions including Nairobi Stock Exchange, Postbank, National Bank of Kenya Trust and National Bank Pension Scheme. She credited her success to a deep faith in God, lots of prayer, willingness to work twice as hard,
ability to learn quickly and having a good group of people who work with her. However, success came with a price:

But let me tell you, there is a price. When you see me here, let me assure you there is a price. And one of the prices you pay is how people view you. So a lot of women will shy away so that they are not construed a certain way. I am construed as a rebel because I stand for what I believe and I will not let any man mess with me. That I don’t do. Feminine I am, but don’t mistake it to mean I will let anybody walk on me. Now, assertiveness has not been taken very kindly by men. And that is why you see when women assert themselves, and you have heard that if you are a successful woman you are divorced. Most probably it is true, I am divorced. You begin asserting yourself and the men have remained in the 18th century. There are two things as a woman, you either choose to be put down or you choose to go ahead and you pay a price. In a society that does not recognize the value of a woman in the economy. That one is no question about it. I do not know, because I, most of the women that I know would like to have a companion but it doesn’t work that way. And you are left asking, what do I do. So you have to make a choice, it’s not an easy choice to make. And you wish you didn’t have to choose between what you have to do and your natural role. But that has come for every professional woman. And it’s tough for women.

In spite of the struggles and challenges, Dr Riria has attempted to serve poor and marginalized women: she said that she thanks God that whereas she grew up poor, she is not poor anymore, and she is glad for the opportunity to help women emancipate themselves economically for the sake of their families and communities. She believes that women need to learn to be confident, to assert themselves, to use the talents, skills and strengths that they have as women to lead and serve. She was of the opinion that women should not give up being women, they do not need to become masculine to be good leaders. To be a successful leader and to manage her multiple roles, she delegates well, achieving organizational goals through people. She is a tempered radical who in spite of being on the more radical end of the spectrum, chooses her battles carefully to make sure she can win and that the battle is about rights and principles.
Summary

In this introductory chapter, I have given a short description of the geographical context in which the study took place. I have also introduced the women who participated in this study, showing who they are, where they lead, and a short description of some of their experiences. I provided eleven snapshots of the women leaders, as well as a short description of the liaison or co-researcher who made this study possible by introducing me to the women leaders.

In the next five chapters, I will give in-depth portraits of five women whose stories were selected because of the depth of interaction, and the fact that they best illustrated the a priori conceptual framework.
CHAPTER V: MRS. MUTHONI GACHANJA LIKIMANI

Fighting without ceasing: “my weapons are my rights, my spears and my guns are my facts, and I fight to win, as defeat is not in my vocabulary”

(Likimani 2005, p.276)

Mrs. Honorine Kiplagat, Africa Regional Chairperson for World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts described Mrs. Muthoni Likimani as a ‘Grande dame’, a woman of substance whose vision and courage has lit the path for others to follow. Muthoni Likimani is indeed an admirable if somewhat eccentric character, who is as always smartly dressed in elegant African attire, western designer clothing or even jeans and t-shirts depending on the occasion. She turned 80 years of age in September of 2005. In spite of her advancing age, she is eloquent about issues ranging from politics and national leadership to family and gender relations. She is a walking encyclopedia of Kenya’s history, the women’s movement, and women’s involvement in fighting for Kenya’s freedom from colonial powers. Muthoni Likimani is a prolific writer; her most recent was an autobiography that was published in September 2005 sub-titled “fighting without ceasing”. I was familiar with her work having read and thoroughly enjoyed her book on women’s involvement in the Mau Mau Freedom Movement in Kenya. She is very well traveled in Africa and around the world and even with her advancing age, has a very sharp memory, remembering names of people, places and details about events that happened sixty years ago as if it was yesterday.

In her autobiography and in narrating her story to me, she recounted her early beginnings as the daughter of one of the pioneer indigenous clergy in the Anglican Church:

It is quite interesting to learn how my father became a Christian and how he met my mother who also converted to Christianity. My father ran away from herding his father’s cattle…
The Rev Levi Gachanja ran away from herding his father’s cattle to join the missionaries where he learnt to read, write, and helped to develop the mission center. In his time as a mission recruit, he supported the missionaries’ efforts at evangelizing the indigenous community. It was during these mission activities that he met his future wife, Ms Wanjiru Kagu whose father was a rich trader. Ms Wanjiru was baptized the same day that she and Mr. Gachanja married, the first church wedding in the region in 1912. Rev and Mrs. Gachanja spent their entire lives as a clergy family serving the communities in central Kenya for many decades: Rev Gachanja died at about 86 years of age in 1973, and Mrs. Gachanja died at the ripe old and still able age of 104. Mrs. Likimani had eight siblings, five brothers and three sisters; her oldest brother died a few years ago but the others were alive and healthy as of September 2005. Mrs. Likimani is very fond of telling stories about her growing up years and their large family, her deceased brother was so much older than she that he was her primary school teacher was. One of her most critical memories is how they lived at the periphery of the mission station whereas the white missionaries, even when they were younger and less experienced than Rev Gachanja, would occupy the central place of honor. To her young mind, this racial discrimination was inconsistent with the kind of God the same missionaries were preaching. This would be the beginning of racial awareness for the young Muthoni, which crystallized later with her observations during the Mau Mau freedom struggle, her educational experiences in the United Kingdom, and her participation in the post-independent Kenya’s women’s movement.

With her strict Christian African upbringing, it followed that Muthoni would be educated in missionary schools. She recounted how the girls were being groomed for wifely duties such as cleaning, cooking, and looking after children whereas the boys were being trained for
professions outside the home. Muthoni appreciated this education because she found use for it later in life. As she told it:

One of the very good things our missionary teachers taught us was home economic with practical lessons. The cookery class was well equipped, not with electricity or gas cookers, but we used wood ovens known as Dover. We were taught western way of cooking, how to roast meat in the oven and cook vegetables. We were also taught how to bake cakes, scones, bread and other goodies; I must say what I know today was taught to me by my missionary teachers. The sewing classes were very thorough. We did embroidery and made fancy baby clothes… Mrs. Soles used to teach us baby care at a small maternity hospital next to our school… As for the home, we learned the proper way to polish wood and do the laundry. Even to this day, what they taught me is what I practice and what I have taught many others through schools, the community and mostly the radio and demonstrations on television. (Likimani 2005, p. 23-24).

After her primary education at the mission school, Muthoni could not continue into high school because there were no girls’ high schools prior to 1948. As such, she trained as a primary school teacher, one of three options for girls who did well at the primary level; the other two options were nursing and midwifery, none of which appealed to her. Her other option would have been to attend a girls’ high school at Gayaza, Uganda, but this was vetoed by her older brother, because he was afraid she would be lost so far away from home. So she was admitted at Kahuhia Teachers College, a stone’s throw away from the mission station in which she had spent her entire life. However, as luck would have it, a teachers’ college for women was started near Nairobi and she transferred. For the first time, Muthoni was able to get away from the constricting mission environment and attend a government institution. As she recalled:

This was a good school for me. It was a government school, not a missionary school. Teachers like Miss Dorothy Dodds, Ms Kirk and Dr Parry were very good and understanding. We came from many parts of Kenya and had a chance to mix and befriend girls from other parts of Kenya… This was an eye opener for me. It was the first time I could talk the way I wanted; dress the way I felt; plait my hair, which I could not do at Kahuhia; wear jewellery on weekends; and attend church if I wanted to. (Likimani 2005, p. 25).
After her training at Government Girls Teacher Training College, Muthoni returned to Kahuhia Teachers College as a tutor. Soon after, she would get married and move to the city. Mrs. Likimani was married to a man from outside her language group, she being a Gikuyu from central Kenya, a farming community; she was married to Dr. Jason Likimani, a Maasai and the first African doctor in Kenya. She recounted her experiences as an African doctor’s wife, the racial discrimination that they experienced in the colonial period where Africans were at the bottom of the racial rung, Asians just above them, and white people at the top. In this context, she and her husband would often be denied and have to fight to get the same rights such as housing from the colonial government as their white and Asian counterparts.

In the School of Hard Knocks

Muthoni’s life with Dr. Likimani was tumultuous to say the least. She recounted how they traveled to different parts of Kenya due to his frequent transfers as a government doctor. At one point, she was left with her in-laws when Dr. Likimani traveled for graduate studies to the UK. However, she enjoyed the status that her being a doctor’s wife accorded her and the opportunities it opened up for her children to get to the best schools in Kenya at that time. Behind the high life, the shopping trips to the city, the shopping from UK stores via catalogue, driving cars, which were a rarity amongst Africans in the mid fifties, and all the other good things that came with her life as a doctor’s wife, Muthoni was deeply troubled. Dr. Likimani considered it his ‘African’ duty to carry on extra marital affairs, arguing that Africans were polygamous by nature and she should be glad he hadn’t actually married a second wife. He was also physically abusing her, in addition to making decisions about the children without bothering to include or inform her. She told her story candidly in the autobiography thus:

It was difficult for me to be the wife of a famous, well to do top medical professional. He was a handsome man who enjoyed socializing; spending time with other people and
coming home at dawn. He would spend holidays with his unknown friends, leaving me at home and of course not informing me where he would be. This kind of behavior would require a special woman to tolerate. Others survive, and many women manage. Indeed, it was and still is a common practice inmost African marriage. Many women, especially wives of prominent people, would rather continue holding on to their marriage’s even if in practice, they were already divorced. But for me, I just could not tolerate that kind of life… In addition to this, any question on my part aroused his anger and ended with a fight. In my parents home I had never seen my father beating my mother. Yet with JC I had to say sorry even after being physically manhandled… I quarreled with him about his moving around with other women… My children were already noticing the tension… One of the most painful experiences I encountered during the time that my marriage was undergoing that strain was when my husband decided to take my daughters to Tanzania without telling me. I did not even know where my children were.

Muthoni opted for sanity and physical survival, she was afraid that one day his physical abuse may end in her death. Amongst the Maasai community, this would not raise an eyebrow; even so called educated Maasai didn’t think twice about abusing their wives. But for Muthoni, the emotional hurt and physical trauma was too much for her to endure. In thinking back, Muthoni said that her husband really was no worse than any other men were in his age group, but she was ill equipped to handle real life outside the mission station:

I admit that some of my problems were of my own making, through lack of advice and inexperiance. We were brought up to be straightforward and truthful. I just wish we were also told that society could be crooked! We were taught to trust, but little did we know how untrustworthy people could be! We were taught to be kind and considerate, but our kindness could sometimes be termed as foolishness!

Muthoni’s mission station upbringing in her opinion produced an academically equipped, domesticated, but un-African young woman. The sorts of lessons that she would have learnt by interacting with village women was lost on her. They would have advised her about what to do in her marriage, how to treat her husband, not just cooking, cleaning, and taking care of his children in a western style, but more importantly, what was expected of her as an African man’s wife. For example, they would have told her that African men do not appreciate being asked where they are going or when they will be back, or where they have been by their wives. They consider
a sign of insubordination- thus her constant beatings whenever she queried her husband. African mothers would have advised her on how to ask tactfully, without arousing her husband’s anger. She complained that she also missed out even on simple things like the games that girls played, and the lessons they learnt when they went through initiation ceremonies, which prepared them for their cultural roles. As such, Muthoni was a western educated professional woman, but a very poor African. It would take her years to learn how to be an African woman. As the Swahili proverb says, “Asiye funzwa na mamaye hufunzwa na ulimwengu”: She who wasn’t taught by her mother would learn in the school of hard knocks. She felt that she might also have passed on some of those poor lessons to her children:

It is not how I dress, or trying to be an American, or trying to be Mzungu. It is not that. It is who you are, with great confidence, decency, with good direction, that is what it’s about. And I think me being a mother; we mislead our daughters and sons of course. Telling them to be western is what makes you civilized… But my daughters, my daughters are grown and you could all either be my daughters or granddaughters. It’s about learning what to take from mzungus and what to leave, I don’t hate mzungus, I am very mzungu myself. But it’s to take what is good and leave the rest. You should be confident, you should never be shaken, that’s how I look at it

Here she confessed her westernization when she said she is very mzungu; mzungu is the Swahili word for white person or someone who is westernized. She felt that one needed to learn how to pick and choose what to take from western culture and what to leave. That isn’t always an easy demarcation to create, and it took her many years of experiencing life in many different contexts to be able to finally define for herself what it meant to be an African, a Kenyan and a woman. She is somewhat of a contradiction: one day she is elegant and queenly in her elaborate African attire, the next she is strutting around in the village in her jeans and t-shirt; a woman of many worlds who seamlessly moves between and among roles as mother, grandmother,
community leader, wizened elder, political commentator, gender analyst, and mentor to many women.

After Muthoni left her husband, she moved into a 10 ft by 10 ft room in the laborers section of colonial Nairobi, where she lived for a year amongst Nairobi’s working poor. Later on, she was able to move to better accommodation – she was working for Railways Corporation as a welfare worker, helping women, especially wives of railway workers to acquire literacy, homecare, and vocational skills. She utilized many of the skills she had acquired through her mission education, as well as the educator’s know-how from being a trained teacher. In the course of her work, she came across information about scholarships being offered by the British Council to travel to the UK for further training. She applied and was accepted, even though she didn’t have some of the requisite education, specifically the high school education she missed out on because there were no girls high schools prior to 1948.

In the UK, Muthoni interacted with many African dissidents who had traveled for further studies, or who were agitating for their nations’ independence from British colonial rule. She became very politically aware through her observations and interactions with them. In addition, she got a job with the British Broadcasting Corporation in their Swahili bureau service, where she interviewed women leaders from around the world and broadcast their stories. Muthoni trained in media, education and development, and health and nutrition studies.

When Muthoni returned to Kenya, all her earlier experiences would prove invaluable in her new life. She utilized her broadcasting skills in her work with the Kenya broadcasting services, where she interviewed leaders from Kenya and around the globe and broadcast those interviews. She also traveled around the country observing women’s development activities and broadcasting these to a national audience. Here she also did children’s programming, collecting
and telling stories as Shangazi, or auntie. However, after serving for many years in the broadcasting services, she was passed over for a promotion, which was given to a man who had no broadcasting experience, merely because he was a, a man, and b, a friend of the managing director. Muthoni not only quit her job, but on her way out, deleted all the interview tapes that she had collected for all those years. No way was she going to allow her new boss to use the materials she had slaved over. In spite of this action, KBS used many of her old programs repeatedly: they were that good.

After leaving KBS, Muthoni went to work for one of her former clients whom she had served in advertising. Here she worked for several years as a public relations personality, but was once again passed over for promotions. The first time, a man was brought in from the outside to take a role she felt more than qualified to do. Later on, one of the boss’s wives was brought in as a director and this time, Muthoni couldn’t take any more. This woman never did any work, and spent all her time in beauty salons, spas or shopping. Muthoni felt that with all the business she had brought this company, they should have honored her with that directorship as a matter of course. So she walked out once again, but this time, she vowed never to be bossed around by anybody.

Becoming an Institutional Entrepreneur

Noni’s publicity came into being after Muthoni’s employment discrimination fatigue, and was a booming success because many of her clients moved with her. Noni’s was the first Public Relations Company that was owned by an indigenous African and a woman at that. Muthoni not only represented various companies in their PR efforts, but also began to engage in publishing her own works. She was also involved in city governance when she was nominated into the Nairobi city council for a term. As a council member, Muthoni came face to face with corruption
and even more gender discrimination – she was the only woman in a man’s world. She fought many battles, eventually getting dropped from the council. She had also tried to run for parliament but could not make it because she wouldn’t engage in tribal politics, and did not have the money to throw around during campaigns like her opponents. She expressed some of her frustrations:

I think the worst thing in this country is fear. The other one is, and I have been a politician and I have been a councilor. I have even been a chairman of a very important department. There are two words I loathed as a councilor, ‘to be on the safe side, don’t touch that’. To be on the safe side from what? You will never get promotion, you will never get what you want. To be not the safe side, shut your mouth. That’s one thing that, my goodness, I used to be angry.

When Muthoni looks back at her 80 years of walking the earth, she wondered whether some of her decisions were too hasty, whether perhaps she could have done things differently. If she had stayed married, would she have survived? Would have children grown up alright, with both parents, in a normal family? Was she too hasty, too intolerant, or just unprepared for the realities of African marriages? Should she have quit her jobs when she did or should she have waited a little longer? When these moments of second-guessing herself come up, she looks at everything she was able to achieve, and decides it was all worth it. If she had stayed married, she would have remained frustrated and beaten; instead, she was able to get education and use her knowledge, skills and expertise in development work and local governance. Below is a narrative poem I wrote and presented at a conference as a portrait of Muthoni Likimani. Cucu means grandmother in Gikuyu language:

Cucu Muthoni

Eighty years old in September of 05

Vibrant and vivacious
Wisdom flows from your mouth
History like a river over rocks
Warmth and hospitality as the granny that you are

Cucu Muthoni,
Feisty and fiery
Fighting with words
never fitting in
Yet famous and favored

Your old eyes blaze with the fire of knowledge
Your ears ring with the sound of wisdom
Your mouth oozes sagacious words like honey
Your very touch firm with the resolve
To keep on fighting without ceasing

Decades ago
You were a teacher
A media personality
A publicist and publisher
A politician unlike any other
Fighting with the weapons at your disposal
Seeking justice by rewriting history
Once married to the first African medical doctor
Who beat you senseless severally
In spite of the status that came with being Mrs. Daktari,
You walked out of that union
Preferring to stay alive and poor
Rather than six feet under and rich
The challenge of leaving your children behind
While you pursued a better life for you and them
You learnt to fight for others
To inform and inspire others to act
The sacrifices you have made
Are our heritage and your legacy

Master storyteller,
Historian extraordinaire
Placing women where they have so far been missing in action
At the heart of the fight for our nations independence
Without your research and writing
We would never know the human impact of colonial rules
like the infamous passbook that limited African travels within their own land!
Or the curfews that rendered our people aliens in their own villages
And how the women collectivized
To keep their children alive and their men fed in the forest

Thank you

Your words will live on long after your candle stopped burning

Rewriting History

Muthoni’s greatest contribution has been in the area of writing and re-positioning women in Kenya’s history. Her most well known book, ‘Passbook Number F.47927: Women and Mau Mau in Kenya’ (1985) is a recollection of anecdotes that were told to her or that she experienced during the first liberation movement in Kenya. As the wife of a doctor, she was protected from the worst of it. She participated by helping prisoners to communicate with their loved ones through letters. Sometimes she would go and search for them herself and bring them to the hospital where Dr Likimani was treating the prisoners. As a Maasai man, Dr Likimani was not considered a threat to the colonial administration because the Maasai did not participate in the freedom struggle. Muthoni however had to be vetted, she was a Gikuyu married to a Maasai, and the Gikuyu were the strongest opponents and most active freedom fighters against the colonialists. Later on, Muthoni talked with women who had been in the forest and who had experienced the struggles first hand. Some of the women were involved in the forest, others were prostitutes in Nairobi who hid ammunition and guns stolen from home guards and colonial policemen in the course of their ‘business’; these would be passed on to the freedom fighters in the forest. She deconstructed those stories by illustrating that whereas women were left out of the normative discourse on Kenya’s freedom struggle, without their participation, the struggle might not have been as successful. She explained this in painstaking detail:

One thing I wanted to say, what you have been saying, about woman’s power in her. Whether she can write her name, she knows her role. We have never met Wahu, we met but we never talked. And I write what I think. During emergency, and I thank God for keeping me still alive and giving me still my little memory. When I was young, we had
emergency. People fighting the colonialists. The Mau Mau, the forest fighters. You read so many books. You never see the name of a woman who fought. Have you ever read any? If you have pass it on to me and I will return your money. (Laughter). But there was a time, in central province, there were no grown up men. There was no grown up man, free. You are either in the forest fighting or in detention, or you read shot dead. So others run away and go hide in Sudan, in Ethiopia, everywhere. There was only a handful, who were also fighting not with Africans but as home guards. So the woman and her children were left alone in the central province, alone with their children. I am still following what you say, maybe you will think about it when you talk to these people. What happened is, who was feeding those people in the forest and when they came out of the forest they would be shot? It’s the women who used their heads. One was working for me later. She told me, “I used to fill bullets”, this is a bare foot woman, “in my market basket. Then I would put maize floor or beans and carry it. I would meet these armed forces, and I would say, habari watoto”. And they would say habari mama, because they don’t know she is the one transporting bullets. And she will go and will take the stuff to the safe place they had agreed with the forest fighters. Without that bare footed woman who has never been in a classroom, they would not have survived. Some women even went to the forest to fight, like one I know called Muthoni. I know not because she is called Muthoni like me, but she was there, field Marshall Muthoni. If these women were not there? And the reason I talk about it, if you look at the forest. The woman would be caught up in communal forced labor from seven thirty in the morning to four thirty; by the time she walked back to her hut it is dark. And mzungu were asking, these maize and beans, when were they planted? Because these women who planted the gardens spent all day at communal forced labor making a road for the armed forces to drive on to get to the forest to kill your brothers, are you with me? There is no road, there were no bridges, its women who were making them because men were not there. And, they would still see beans growing, potatoes growing, when were they planted? Because they have been at work from seven thirty until four thirty. When did they do it? It’s because they would go and organize, I don’t have this, and do you have firewood? The one would give wood, the other will give some water, and the other will have collected some food from the garden and dug around a few rows of potatoes. That’s what an African woman will do. They only talk about Wangu wa Makeri, what did she do other than dancing naked? I don’t praise her and she is from my village. And she is in the archives and the museum, Wangu wa Makeri, what did she do? The woman who did something was called Nyanjiru, who was shot dead at the University of Nairobi when they were following Harry Thuku. When the police started shooting and the men ran away, she asked, are you men? Bring me your trousers I put them on. And then they shot her dead. She was the first to be killed during protests. But Wangu who stripped naked, what did she do for the community? That’s what I was saying that a woman is a survivor. Even when she is stripped off her government job, she will still survive. In my area it is the women who put mabati on the thatch on their roofs. They also decided they wanted piped water at their homes, and they organized and brought it. Communally they buy cows and get milk. If you leave men alone they can’t do that, but women can organize. That’s what I was trying to say to support you. I am very proud of being a woman.
Muthoni historicized women’s status from pre-independence era to the current period in Kenya’s history, showing how women had learnt survival mechanisms during their colonial experience that they utilized for their social and economic emancipation long after the colonial struggle. They were able to collectivize to deal with the constraints of forced labor in their attempts to ensure that their families survived the struggle. In post-independent Kenya, they collectivized to put iron sheet roofs over their houses, which were often made of thatch, to pay school fees for their children, to start small enterprises, and to solve other social and economic problems that they encountered. In historicizing women’s experiences, Muthoni helped us to understand how African women in Kenya were creative problem solvers who adapted to changing situations fluidly in order to ensure the survival of their families. When she made these connections for us during the focus group, she then asserted her pride in being one of those African women who had survived through struggles and succeeded to tell her story. She was at this point also attempting to help the younger ones of us at the focus group to re-connect with what it means to be an African woman: a journey she had made herself as evidenced in her early beginnings in missionary Christianity, her failed marriage, and her persistent struggle to define her own identity. In contra-distinction, Muthoni reflected on the fact that the resiliency of the African women was missing from the normative discourse, yet the mistakes of a few, like the infamous Wangu wa Makeri were eloquently displayed and earned a place in Kenya’s history text books. Those who had been real leaders and who had sacrificed for the country like Nyanjiru and Field Marshall Muthoni were missing from those history books; yet those who were a blight upon the history of women and leadership were forever in our memory. To Muthoni, this was an example of using the canon, in this case, the historical canon to support a certain point of view; the view that women cannot and should not be leaders. In defiance to that canon, Muthoni
published Passbook Number F.47927 to tell the other side of the story; she had to publish it herself because none of the Kenyan publishers was willing to touch it with a ten-foot pole. Muthoni also published other smaller monographs about women’s participation in the development, utilizing the interviews she had conducted while working for the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation in the sixties. She also made use of stories she listened to when she was a PR personality and was representing various organizations that supported women’s grassroots development initiatives. One of her publication on women and development in Kenya was the only publication that was available for distribution about Kenyan women during the 1985 UN Decade of Women meeting in Nairobi.

Spirited and Radical Servant Leader

In spite of her many struggles to define herself and to find a place for her to contribute, Muthoni has been a spirited and radical servant leader. She is spirited because whereas her missionary Christianity mis-educated her on how to be an African woman, the spiritual roots have remained to this day. She has been very critical of that Christianity – so much so that she wrote a book about it entitled: “They Shall Be Chastised”. In this book, she reflected on the conflict between missionary Christianity and traditional African lifestyles, attempting to show how Christianity disrupted the African way of life. She has continued to be involved in the Christian women’s movements, beginning with Young Christian Women’s Association of which she was one of the pioneer African members and now a trustee, and continuing with her church’s women’s guild. She felt that involvement in the church’s women’s guild gave her the chance to be nourished spirituality through interacting with other women, participating in service activities and engaging in bible studies. On the other hand, she was critical of the Christian women’s organization because she felt that they did more “bible stuff” than anything else. As such, her
participation was aimed at bringing some changes to the priorities of the women, helping them understand their roles beyond the church walls towards community building as responsible African mothers. She utilized the Bible to teach against fear, which she believed to be the greatest hindrance to women’s advancement and engagement in public leadership:

In Philippians 4, I read the Bible a lot but I don’t know how to preach, my father did that for me. There is a place which says, maybe Reverend can help me, and I think it is in Philippians, whatever thing

Rev: 4:8

Muthoni: 4:8, this book is complicated. Finally brothers, and I will say finally sisters, whatever is true, whatever thing are noble, whatever things are right, whatever things are pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything be excellent and praiseworthy, think about it. End of sermon. And what am saying now, I have even said it in a book which I am going to launch next month. Things in Kenya, things in Africa have been ruined by the word called fear…

She also used the stories about African women in colonial Kenya and their agency towards ending colonial domination to help women understand that they have a role to play in public service, political engagement, as well as family emancipation. Her own service included women and economic development activities as well as extending a helping hand to those in need. She told many stories in her autobiography about helping poor relatives and villagers to find jobs or to get access to educational opportunities; she felt that doing this enabled her to contribute to their empowerment so that she need not give handouts; instead, she was giving them a chance at making it on their own.

Resonance

Muthoni had a lot to say about many things; she had an opinion on everything that came her way, including the then hotly debated constitution review process in Kenya. However, what I took away from her was the idea that African women have been mis-represented in history because their stories of resiliency and strength in the midst of grave national realities were left
out. She explained in detail how women collectivized to solve social and economic problems. She elaborated on women’s leadership capabilities by relating how grassroots women led, often without fanfare and glory, in their search for social and economic justice. She showed by her own example, especially in her short stint as a city council member that it is possible to be in political leadership and not be corrupt as is the norm in Kenya. She modeled for me and for other Kenyan women, and audiences everywhere what it means to be persistent, resilient and fearless in fighting for what one believes is hers by right.
Ms Nangurai is the quiet, even shy but formidable and unyielding headmistress of African Inland Church Girls Boarding Primary School, located 110 Kilometers from Nairobi city. Whereas I had never met her before, I had read about her and heard about her in various circles due to her unflinching campaign against early marriages in Maasai land, and her mission of giving the girls a safe place to get their education. Reverend Joyce knew her well and introduced her to me, saying that her story would give a different but necessary spin to the whole question of what it means to be a woman and a leader in an African context. When we got to Kajiado, Ms Nangurai was waiting for us eagerly. I was struck by her simple dress and polite mannerisms; it was really difficult to envisage that this is the woman who had earned notoriety for her daring to contravene her culture by giving Maasai girls a refuge from forced marriages. I was expecting an angry, loud and fiery warrior. Instead, here she was all shy smiles and open arms.

Defining Moments

Ms Nangurai was born in Ngong at the outskirts of Nairobi City in the late forties. Her father was an employee of the colonial government working in the department of forestry, and would later become a Christian due to the influence of the missionaries in the neighboring Kikuyu Mission. She told her story thus:

I am an old timer. I am here by the grace of God. I was born in this district, I come from a family of eight and I was the sixth born. I have an elder sister and I learnt a lot from her. My elder sister went to alliance girl’s high school, she was one of those girls who went to alliance when it was African girl’s high school, but she was withdrawn and married off. I
always remember that day when I was a little girl and my father came home and found my sister talking to some men. He was very annoyed because she was supposed to marry another man. So he was very annoyed and withdrew her from school and gave her away in marriage. When my sister was given away she took me with her and she wanted to give me what she never got. So I went to school around here (Kajiado) I did my KAPE and managed to join alliance girl’s high school in 1962. My father had to sign a paper to say that he would not withdraw me from school. My secondary school days were not so easy, nobody came to visit me, but I think I got used because we were many that were not visited. I finished in 1965 and joined Kenyatta University College in 1966 for a bachelor’s degree in education. After I graduated I went to teach in Olkejuado High school, down the road from here as I was trained to teach secondary school. I got married in 1970 and by 1974 I had to move out of Olkejuado to join my husband in Mombassa, where I taught at Aga Khan High School. Then my husband was transferred again to Nairobi and I decided to come and settle at home, so I came back to Olkejuado in 1977.

Ms Nangurai began her story with the statement ‘I am here by the grace of God’, setting the stage for the conversation by placing her story in spiritual terms. Then she went on to tell her early beginnings story in a matter of fact, even short hand version; that she had witnessed her sister being withdrawn from Alliance Girls School, which was the first, and at that time the only girls secondary school in the country, to be married off. Perhaps this experience at her tender age set the stage for what would later become her mission in life; rescuing girls from the fate that befell her sister. She herself was lucky in that she was not withdrawn from Alliance, and was able to complete high school and join university where she studied education in order to become a teacher. She got married after her university education to a fellow Maasai, and had three children.

Foundation for a Tempered Radical for Social Justice

The second defining moment in Ms Nangurai’s life came while she was a teacher at Olkejuado High School. The governing board had decided to make the school single sex, to remove the girls from the co-ed school in order to improve the performance of the school in national examinations. She explained:
The AIC church started AIC girls in 1959, under the aim missionaries as a boarding school because of the nomadic way of the Maasai people. So I was appointed as head in 1977 but I didn’t come then. The Olkejuado was a mixed school but they decided to phase out the girls in order to improve the academic performance of the school. I remember I wanted to quit in protest and so I came to AIC where I had been appointed head, this time in 1980.

Ms Nangurai told me this story rather factually, but later on in the Focus Group meeting, she elaborated on that defining moment as she responded to a question about women in the boardroom. Below is the conversation:

Nangurai: I am wondering how old the other people in the board are.

Zeba: I am actually the youngest person in that board. The others are in their fifties or late forties, and all men.

Wahu: then you are the most qualified. Because when they were at you age, they were nothing. But you at your age you are where they are.

Nangurai: that’s why I was asking because I know I faced similar issues. I was in this board for Olkejuado secondary and I get to the meeting, and they are discussing removing the girls from the school to improve the performance of the school. So they are making these decisions and I ask what the background is and how we got here. And the chairman of the board said, you are just a woman. Decision has already been made. This is where her mother (Zeba) went to school, they are actually related.

Wahu: she said he is her grandfather..

Nangurai: Yeah. So when I ask what the background is and how they reached here, he said, “do you know you have no right to speak here?” And I said, actually I do, I am a member of the board, and we are not in a Manyatta, and I need to talk. And he started cussing at me in kimaasai, ‘she has no manners’. Do you know that night I could not sleep because it was so hurtful. Because there were only two of us women at that board and our opinion was neither sought nor heard. And the District Education Officer was asking me, how do you do it. I was telling him I have no godfather, and it became now a

I am not going to go home, I will stay right here. The only thing I won’t do, I won’t eat. I always remember that and feel sad. Later I went home, the matter was reported to my husband, and I had to go home. And I told him I am not apologizing, you go and apologize because I won’t. And apologize for yourself not for me. And it really brought hustle at home. So I can understand if you are the only woman and the men are much older, these are the people who want to try to silence you because you are young so that
who want to try to silence you because you are young so that means unqualified to speak. Interrupt them.

Ms Nangurai elaborated on what had taken place at Olkejuado before she quit and moved to AIC Girls’ school. In this conversation, she espoused a bravery and courage that looking at her shy and quiet personality, it was flabbergasting for me to visualize her challenging a group of elders, the man in question would have been her own father’s age. In Maasai culture, a woman has no room to speak up; a young woman has absolutely no space, even in a school board where she was appointed because of her position as a teacher. She rebelled against the school board and the elders of her community who reported her ‘bad manners’ to her husband. This was a defining moment in that it was the turning point for her; she quit and moved to AIC girls to attend to the needs of girls. It may also have been a defining moment in her marriage because later, her husband would divorce her on the urging of the elders – they felt she was behaving like a man, challenging the status quo and contravening her place as a woman by engaging in her rescue mission. She explained how this compelling mission began:

For three years I tried to find out why the girls were not performing well. I noticed that girls were dropping out a lot. I was younger then and I really feared the culture of our people so I did nothing about it. So up to 1986 I did nothing, but in that year, one of our girls when home and she was going to be married off. But she said no. she wrote a letter to the DC asking us to find a way of rescuing her. so the DC came and I told him I was afraid I couldn’t do it, it’s something I would like to do but I can’t do it. so the DC went to the fathers place. Lucky for her she had not had contact with her husband. Because traditionally we stay for five days before we move to the husbands. Lucky for her she was rescued and she came back here. She is one person who really inspires me. Because during the holidays she said I cannot go home because they will marry me off. I did not know what to do with her but after talking with my family they agreed to house her. So, then I was thinking how can I do this, how can I rescue a girl. When we succeeded with Charity now I thought to myself that no other girls will be given away if we can help it. The beginning was very rough because now the fathers would come here and demand to have their daughters back. We didn’t have a fence here and they would come to pull away their daughters. The district commissioner was kind he gave us protection which, when you are given that kind of protection its not very comfortable coz you keep
worrying, supposing he sleeps, why do we have to have one. It’s very disturbing but necessary. So we started with one, and others began to come.

Ms Nangurai, though fearful of contravening culture, saw an opportunity and grabbed it: here was a girl who had found a way to flee from forced marriage; the district commissioner was willing to help by giving them protection; now it was up to Ms Nangurai to help Charity to get her education undisturbed. When I talked to Charity who happened to be visiting the day I was interviewing Ms Nangurai, she said that whereas what she was doing hadn’t been done before in as far as running away and seeking help from the provincial administration, she was determined to complete her primary education. At the time when she was being forced into marriage, she was only in the sixth grade. She was able to complete primary school, attend secondary school and train as a nurse. She worked in her rural community bringing much-needed healthcare to her people. She also said that she had reconciled with her father after she completed her education because she was able to bring him blankets seeking his blessings. When her parents died, she took over responsibility for her younger siblings whom she has educated. Her success story is part of what keeps Ms Nangurai inspired and motivated to keep fighting to save girls,

When you see your successes it really encourages you. And I know I have kept saying I will leave. But when you see charity and others like her, its very encouraging. Like charity is now an orphan her parents are both dead. But reconciliation had already taken place with her parents. So with her first salary she took her father a blanket seeking for blessings. Now she is the one who is taking care of her sisters and brothers. So when you see that you get that strength.

Social Contradictions of a Leading Woman

Ms Nangurai’s life as a woman and a leader is filled with contradictions. One the one hand, she is the principal of a girl’s school where she has been attempting to help reduce the illiteracy rates amongst Maasai women by providing a safe haven for them to get their education. This should be a commendable role; instead, she has endured many years of being treated as a
cultural traitor. She has struggled with knowing that her community, whom she has served diligently for most of her professional life, have little or no appreciation of what she has been attempting to do in educating their women. Both the men and the women struggle to understand her mission. She described it thus:

It’s very difficult to hammer these things into our people’s minds especially because they are so illiterate. I believe education opens up the mind so one can think further. I keep telling them that’s why am giving the girls an education so as to open their minds so they can see beyond what their mothers see. When I talk to the women I realize that they don’t even realize that they are disadvantaged.

As a Maasai woman herself, she has been able to see beyond what the rest of her womenfolk could see, because of her education, unlike her illiterate counterparts. In the statements above, she illustrated what is being echoed by all the women leaders; both men and women support patriarchy, that is why it is so difficult to change the people’s mindsets. However, Ms Nangurai keeps on doing her mission; in fact, she planned on continuing with the mission even after she retires – she was slated to retire in December 2005. Her vision was to build a shelter on her property in Kajiado town so that she can continue to offer the girls a place to stay during school vacation periods. Perhaps the greatest contradiction in her story was the fact that the people she was attempting to help did not seen realize that they were disadvantaged. In most cases, the girls ran away from the forced marriages and FGM by themselves, with no help from their mothers – actually it is the women who conduct FGM. However, Ms Nangurai reported that it isn’t all doom and gloom; some of the parents whose children ran away like Charity and managed to get an education now appreciate the contribution she has made. But this is a rare occurrence, as she explained:

We have received a lot of support but the community is like, right now you can’t tell whether they are for it or still against it. From the year 2001 I started seeing that the men are coming to look for places for their daughters. They will also come in to say thank you for keeping the girls here and giving them an education after the girl has succeeded and is
working and is able to help. So they appreciate that. A few parents have come and it’s very gratifying.

Cultural Warrior: Spirited Tempered Radical and Servant Leader

For Ms Nangurai to survive, thrive and succeed in her chosen mission of educating Maasai girls, she has had to become a tempered radical; attempting to change her people’s mindset and cultural norms while living and working amongst them. She has chosen to serve her people, yet being a highly trained and experienced teacher, she could have taught in any other school in the country. Instead, she chose to contribute to the emancipation of her own people, to help them move along the development path. She has experienced what it means to be a tempered radical who is an outsider/within in her own community. She described some of her survival mechanisms thus:

You have to respect the elders. Even though you know they are against you, still play your part. And to be a leader you have to be a servant. You have to set an example. You have to be a good example. You have to block your ears and be focused. You should not allow people to move you from your goal. You have to have a vision and a goal. You have to be focused on doing something which is empowering Maasai women. You have to fit in with the community, you should not be above them, and you should be with them so that they can listen to you.

In reality, what Ms Nangurai practices is attempting to fit into the culture while also being a radical critique of the same culture. For example, she talked earlier about her experience at the Olkejuado board meeting where she challenged the elders. Yet in the quote above she is advocating for respecting of elders. She has to manage the contradictions and paradoxes of her outsider/within positionality in order to both fit in and be a credible critique. In addition to advocating for respecting elders, she also encourages her girls to learn about their culture. She explained the intricate maneuvering that goes into managing the situation for herself and for the girls as well:
So these girls, when you listen to the girls they have different stories. And it is good when you listen to them. Some of the girls are brought here by these lobby women who are at divisional levels. Some are brought by their mothers. We have mothers like that. Some are brought by the chiefs. Some come on their own. They just ran. And when we go to talk to them we teach them some of the skills they can use. We tell them they should not say no to a marriage. But they should then negotiate and say they would like to first complete their education. But if they insist, you go along with them depending on how far away you are. Because the girls have to be brought to Kajiado town to do their wedding shopping. So some of the girls run during that shopping trip, so they look for away of running and they ran very far. Going against the traditions and the culture was not easy. I forgot to tell you that we hold culture talks where old women come and talk to the girls on their culture. and sometimes we hold debates we go thru the cultures and say which ones are good which ones are not and some of them walk out in protest. Especially when we touch on circumcision. But it’s important. It’s important for them to know what is expected of them. Yeah, coz whatever they are those are their parents.

I did listen to four stories as Ms Nangurai recommended, girls who had run away from forced marriage when they were barely ten years old. One of them had run away from getting the cut and found her way from Transmara district to AIC Kajiado by hitch hiking. Each of the four girls had a vision for what they wanted to do, which included going to college and engaging in careers that would involve giving back to their communities. I guessed that they were inspired by their headmistress’s story and wanted to be like her as far as giving back to their community and getting a university education was concerned.

In the quote above, Ms Nangurai illustrated how she attempted to help the girls’ remained connected to their culture by encouraging them to engage and critic the culture, and listen to their elders. By having those cultural debates, Ms Nangurai was enhancing the girls’ critical thinking and cultural engagement skills, so that they need not become aliens in their community; instead, by comprehending the good, the bad and the ugly of their cultural context, they would be better placed to contribute to their own and others emancipation. It is no wonder that girls like Charity and others who were products of Ms Nangurai’s gentle prodding had achieved their educational goals and returned to the community as teachers, nurses and social workers. Their success was
her reward, better than all the awards and bestowals that she had received over the years from various organizations.

**Resonance**

I was struck by not only the simplicity and shyness evident in Ms Nangurai’s demeanor, but also her apparent gentleness of spirit as well as strength of character. Listening to her talk, one would be forgiven for thinking that she cannot possibly accomplish much; yet she has been able to create an effective rescue program that others have since emulated, and to enable tens of girls to access education. Whereas I knew that her husband had divorced her on account of her work, on the advice of the Maasai elders whom she kept clashing with, she totally refused to talk about this. She simply kept repeating that one had to make many sacrifices, and that her biggest struggle was attempting to manage her mission and her family life. Unlike some of the other women leaders like Dr. Riria and Mrs. Likimani who talked candidly about their divorces, Ms Nangurai was of the old school that believes that being divorced is un-African and a cause of shame – that being the prevalent norm in Kenyan society which blames the victim. What follows are snippets of her expressions about her situation as a woman and a leader in her community:

> Going against the traditions and the culture was not easy... In my community women are not recognized...But in the community I am not very much respected because they take me as someone who thinks she is superior or equal to the men. Because that is one of the reasons why our people don’t educate the girls. They think that if they do the girls will feel equal and they can make their own decisions like looking for a husband for themselves. And deciding not to get married which is wrong in my community...I go by the verse in the bible where Jesus said a prophet is not honored in his own land.

> Ms Nangurai serves her community whether they thank and recognize her for it or not. She is convinced that educating girls will enhance the life of the entire community. Hers is a story of quiet determination and persistence in the face of shocking odds, all for the purpose of elevating the status of women in her community, who would in turn emancipate the entire
community. She has paid a very high price, losing her marriage, losing face in the community which treats her as a cultural traitor, living in a state of dishonor; as she described it, only in her hometown and in her own house is a prophet without honor.
CHAPTER VII: DR ESTHER MOMBO

Righteous Indignation Fueling Action against Injustice

I first met Dr Mombo when she was visiting New York in March 2005 attending a UN consultative meeting on gender. She and my Liaison had come as part of the Kenyan delegation to the UN meeting. She is a professor of church history and theologies from women’s perspectives at St Paul’s Theological College, Kenya as well as the Academic Dean. She is a graduate of St. Paul’s, Trinity College, Dublin, and Edinburgh University, Scotland. She is active in the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and is a prolific writer in the areas of women’s issues, evangelism, HIV/AIDS, Christian-Muslim relations, and poverty in Africa.

Defining Moments

Esther Mombo was born in Kisii district and brought up by her maternal grandmother in the sixties who supported and encouraged her to become a ‘woman preacher’ in a culture where women continued to be demeaned and undermined. As she was telling her story, it was evident that she greatly admired and respected her grandmother who had broken with tradition and gone to school, something that was very rare in the 20s when her grandmother was a girl:

I was born and brought up in Kisii District. Like most girls of my age, I stayed with my grandmother, my mother’s mother. There were other reasons as to why I had to stay with her, but she is the one who brought me up. My mother and father stayed away. I was her first grandchild so she was happy to be with me. I went to school from that home. She is the one who taught me the bible, she ensured I went to Sunday school and actually taught me a lot of our history through stories that had a moral implication to them. Because she was among the first girls in her village that broke with tradition and went to school, she was keen that I went to school. So she told me orally a lot of the bible stories. I remember that stories of the birth of Christ, She also was a preacher in her own right. And was among the ladies who went to preach to women in prison. When I look back I think I did theology not knowing but I think she had a very big influence on my decision. She went on. She had a passion for those women in prison. In the village she was known as the preacher.
Dr Mombo’s grandmother had broken with tradition on two accounts: first was in getting educated as a woman in that era, secondly was in becoming a Christian and an evangelist at that. As Dr Mombo thought back to her upbringing, she realized that she could have chosen to study theology and work in Christian institutions because of her grandmother’s influence. Dr. Mombo attended primary and secondary schools in Kisii before she moved to Nairobi to attend high school, and after high school, she moved in with a relative who promised to send her to college. However, the promise was not kept, and she ended up serving as a nanny to her uncle’s children for a year. This infuriated her to no end:

I finished school and my family didn’t have much money for me to continue school. So I needed to get some work to support the family but an uncle of mine said to my grandmother and my mother that he would take me and would help me to continue with school. But I ended up in his house working as the house girl. I was a relative but a house girl. I helped to bring up two children. I stayed in Buru Buru when Buru Buru was the place to stay.

I woke up at five to go get milk, she goes to college and that was how we lived. The house wasn’t hers, she shared with another family, I couldn’t sleep in the sitting room since that wasn’t theirs. Me and another girl for the other family we slept in the kitchen. So I slept in the kitchen next to the fridge and I did that for a year. One thing that was said while I was with them was that I cared for the children as if they were my own. And other women would come and say how come you have such a good house girl. I did that coz these were my uncle’s children even if I was being paid they were still his. At the end of the year when I moved home, I decided I was going to go to my own home, rather than my grandmother’s. My father was very angry with my mother coz he said here your brother took our daughter that he was going to help her go to school instead he made her a house girl. I remember when I left that home, I told my aunt that I have taken care of your children while you did your degree, but I will get more degrees than you. I went to my home, I remember sitting at home. I came from a home that was very poor where we have the house for parents, and the other house that has chickens, calves and goats is where we children slept. So I was sitting there with my mother, the goats and the calves feeling really angry coz I felt that I had wasted a whole year when I could have been in school. My mother was very good in cooling me down. But I felt really cross. I kept telling my mother one day I will even drive to her house. I told her I wasn’t just meant to be a house girl. At the time you could get a job as a UT. My father did not want me to go back to school coz now he wanted money. So I went and was hired as a UT teacher.
The anger that Dr. Mombo displayed at the injustice she suffered under her uncles and aunts’ hands is a defining factor in her life. It propelled her to want to succeed and surpass her aunt’s one degree, and to make sure she would not be at anybody’s mercies again.

Gender Discrimination in Religious Institutions

After her experience with her relatives, she was hired as an untrained teacher, a defining factor that would determine her later career goals. She amused me to no end when she talked about her inspiration in theological school; that fear of her grandmother made her keep on the straight and narrow:

When I accepted Christ, I felt that God was calling me but I couldn’t be exactly sure where. I wanted to teach adults not children. But I felt that there was a whole area of struggling to convince my father. My father had thought I was going to get married to someone they had chosen, and they felt that because he had a job he could look after me. But they didn’t realize there was no way I was going to rely on a man look after me when I had nothing. So I joined theological school against my father’s wishes. But my mother got the wrath of it. I remember him telling her that the day she comes home pregnant, you and her you are out. So I feared men because I did not want my mother to be thrown out. It’s because of my mother that any approach that a man made, if I saw that he wasn’t quit straight, the fear!

As I went to theological school my grandmother also told me that I need to remember that the men in there maybe Christians but they are real men. So I operated from two sources of inspiration: fear, and the knowledge that I shouldn’t trust the men in the school merely coz they were Christian. And how true my grandmother’s words turned out to be!

Dr Mombo went to theological college against her father’s wishes, but with her grandmother’s blessings, because she felt a calling to serve within ecclesiastical circles. It was amusing to realize that even within her community which is not particularly traditional, merely two decades ago, fathers still expected to choose spouses for their daughters. But Dr Mombo would have none of it. In college, she feared her grandmother, and also feared for her mother should she end up pregnant, thus the drive to stay on the straight and narrow. When she joined
theological college, Dr Mombo faced a new challenge, that of attempting to fit into a decidedly male and clergy-filled arena:

St Paul’s Limuru. I entered through the gate and the men asked me, are you sure you are coming to this school? I you sure you are not going to KCCT down the road? (the teachers college?). Yeah. But I saw one of the women that I met, I thought she was a lecturer coz she was senior. Later I realized she was a student. She is reverend Martha. I thought she was a lecturer. At the time we were six women in a community of 80 students, one married woman the others were single. As I said I met a woman from Meru, her background was similar to mine with a poor family so it was good to bond with her. But in theology we were not welcome. Two women in the class with twenty men. Every derogatory remark was made against us. We felt we were in the wrong place. The college was particularly male – male in structure, male in the content of teaching. Male even in the cafeteria, it was just a male place and we felt we were intruding.

Dr Mombo’s story resonated with me because it was my experience when I entered a graduate seminary in Nairobi; same feeling of being unwelcome; and more often than not, men, be they lecturers, students or staff, telling us women that we were in the wrong place. I guess little had changed between the early eighties and the beginning of the new century: theological institutions were still mainly male. Dr Mombo’s struggles were only just beginning; her experience while in training was merely a harbinger of things to come. In her first day on the job in a theological school, her entire class-including one current Bishop, walked out on her, this after she had struggled to get that posting:

Job-hunting became difficult. So I went back to teaching, I went to a school that belonged to the diocese. I still felt that I wanted to teach adults. So I tried to get a job in a bible school. While the bishop said that he wanted to hire me, the council wasn’t ready to hire a woman. But after a while he called me for the job. But, a, they couldn’t give me my own house and b. Some of the students said they couldn’t be taught by a woman. They couldn’t give me my own house because I was a single woman, and how could they control my morality? So my morality was questioned. I had to live with a local parish priest. And this house I was treated as one of the women, if it’s to cook or clean I did it. They were very conservative people theologically. People whom if you plaited your hair or dressed in a certain fashion you were not born again. I decided I wasn’t going to change my outlook. I had my earrings and I plaited my hair and dressed not in an overly dressy manner, just in the way I could afford. And the parish priest was my student coz they had been ordained before training. And I just took the job, and the first day I went to class, the students said they couldn’t be taught by a woman., only three students remained
in class and actually I taught the whole class period. I said to them I had been given a job and I was going to do it. If they refuse to come to class that is up to them. Because the tribe in which this school was situated had a very low place for woman. They regarded women as children. So if the other women were cleaning I cleaned, if they were cooking I cooked.

In spite of her educational attainments, Dr Mombo would soon learn that sexual discrimination did not end in her theological college; it was alive and well in other theological institutions and in the church as well. The students who walked out of her class were local priests; one can only wonder how they treat women in the churches.

**Becoming a Tempered Radical and Servant Leader**

Dr Mombo attempted to fit in as best as she could in order to carry out her mission of educating church leaders. She cleaned and cooked alongside the other women in her new home, humbling herself to live under a student’s roof just so that she would accomplish her mission. She was rewarded from an unlikely source for her thankless and unrecognized work:

Because I had gotten a first position, I got a prize which was to do a masters program in Europe. So I went to my dad and told him I would be leaving for Europe. My dad was very proud of me and he put together a going away party for me. My uncle came, by this time we had made up and he gave a very good speech. I went to Ireland I did my masters degree and wanted to stay on, but I choose to come back. Also because I couldn’t get an extension, I couldn’t get more money to go on with school and I didn’t want to hide around like many people do.

Her father who had opposed her joining theological training was now very proud of his daughter. Not only had she graduated top of her class, but now she had also been awarded a scholarship for further education in the United Kingdom. Even her uncle who had turned her into a house servant was in attendance at her going away party. However, higher education did not end her problems with gender-based discrimination:

So I came back with a master’s degree thinking I would be treated differently, like at least I could get a house on my own. They still didn’t want to give me a house of my own. The available house was next to the living quarters for male students and they didn’t want to give it to me. I remember one of my colleagues asking if they could trust her to
teach the men, why couldn’t you trust her to live with them? But it was decided that now where will she hang her underwear? You have grown as an African woman and you know we do not hang our underwear outside so how could I do it? But that was a big thing in the council meeting. So here, with a masters degree. I taught in various places as adjunct. But actually for some strange reason I choose to work in that particular school. I felt a call to work in this school even though I earned less than my students. The church and that diocese had very few clergy but by the time I left my colleagues and I had trained about sixty clergy. But back then, the support I got was from male colleagues, who had been in Europe, who treated me as a colleague not as a woman. And they made sure that the students made sure I wasn’t a woman I was a colleague. Even when I was being treated as a child and my morality being scrutinized, my focus was that God had called me here. I served for 8 years. By the end of five years, I needed a break. I had been called to other jobs but I still felt I had a call to this diocese.

Dr Mombo was getting discriminated against on several counts: age, gender and marital status. Within Christian institutions in Kenya, age is revered; being married with children is next to godliness – an experience that also resonates with my own. This is a product of both African traditions where family is of paramount importance, and mission Christianity that advocated for women’s most important work as being wives and mothers. As such, even though she had a master’s degree, getting a job, and getting suitable living quarters was a struggle. But Dr Mombo was convinced that what she was doing was important – it was a compelling and divine mission to help train clergy for the church in that region of the country. Her relationship with God is what gave her the strength to persevere her many struggles. Whereas she is not ordained up to now, Dr Mombo felt that it was necessary for the church to ordain women to enable them to be effective and credible leaders in the church. As such, she undertook crusade to convince the diocese to begin ordaining women, and since she wasn’t asking them to ordain her, she became a credible campaigner:

While in this diocese I initiated the whole dialogue on the ordination of women. Between 1985 and 1995, I spoke about it in every synod. And at first they would chase me and tell me to go away and get a husband. I made a lot of mistakes back then, coz I was young and didn’t know how to play the game. I began politicking coz I realized you had to find ways to gain the men’s trust. By 1990 they had agreed in principle that they would ordain
women so it was working. By the time I was leaving to go and study for my Ph.D I knew they would never go back

In spite of her many mistakes, perhaps because zeal without knowledge is a dangerous thing, Dr Mombo managed to get the diocesan leaders to consider ordaining women. Eventually, she succeeded in convincing them, and the Anglican Church in Kenya was among the first traditional denominations to ordain women. In addition to her success with this vision, she had also managed to elevate the status of her family by building them a good house and supporting her siblings in accessing educational opportunities. Afterwards, Dr Mombo managed to get another scholarship, this time to undertake doctoral studies in Edinburgh University, in Scotland where she undertook research on women’s contribution to the growth of the church in Kenya. On her return, she faced the challenges she had left behind; how to get a fitting job within church-related institutions:

When I returned, I couldn’t get a job. Because I have been within the church and I wasn’t one to go back to public universities, coz I felt hat I had been with the church and I wanted to contribute to the church, I want to critique the church from inside. I job hunted, and taught in various places for a while. Then I saw a job advert in St. Paul’s and I applied for it.

Eventually Dr Mombo got a job at her alma mater, St Paul’s Theological University. Her drive towards working in church institutions was the desire to contribute to the church by critiquing it from within, the mark of a tempered radical. In spite of knowing the struggles awaiting her in church circles, she chose to serve where she felt she could have the most impact. Her struggles intensified because not only was she back in a theological institution, but as the academic dean, an important leadership position. She recounted her struggles:

But in some ways I have had colleagues that are supportive, and others who say we are being ruled by a woman. So I have to find ways to survive, coz one side says its wonderful we have a women, others said she is just a woman. So what exactly is just a woman? We have students who feel you can’t deal with them because you are a woman, not just a woman but a laywoman in a heavily clerical environment. She is just a woman
in a context where a woman has to be identified with her husband at my age. So since I don’t have that is a problem but for me, they serve me just fine. But for them it’s like oddity. So if I became assertive I am not motherly, if I become motherly I am not assertive. So both ways you are a loser. So you better do one thing. And remember when I came they said she is just a woman.

In this context, it seemed like she couldn’t be good enough however much she tried. If she was assertive, then she was not motherly, if she was motherly, then she wasn’t assertive enough – a struggle faced by other women in leadership. In addition, her being single was working against her. However, some of her colleagues once again appreciated her and her work. Students like in her earlier college teaching position felt that they didn’t have to listen to her because she was merely a woman. In most cases, the students who attend theological training tend to be middle-aged men who have been in clergy positions and who have decided to get training, and in most cases, they also come from rural settings where opinions about women in leadership are still unfavorable. However, Dr Mombo was not going to give up, she served as best she could, taking upon herself the names they threw at her and turning these to her benefit:

The first management meeting we had, I learnt that a woman was being sacked because she was suspected of having done an abortion and she is a single woman. So I come to the management meeting, and I am sitting there with six men am the only woman. I quickly look at these papers, and being a leader, it clicks on me. I couldn’t tell you who she was, but I knew I had seen these two women and she was probably one of them, both were single. I did not know then personally. I had nothing to say about them. So I raise my hand and I raise a point of order, could I be given a little bit of the story about this one. One man there says, we finished that. And I said no, its matters arising. And this man in management kept saying I am his daughter. And I said to him no, I have no father here. The relationship I can have with you is that of a brother, you are my brother and you can be either my older brother or my younger brother. And what I was resenting then, when he said a father, then I cannot question anything they say. So I demand that I be told. So they said she had bled and the clinical officer had confirmed. Have we found out who made her pregnant? They are all shocked. Why? I said, she did not make herself pregnant? Mr. Chairman we are being taken back. Then the chairman decided we have a feminist in our midst. So they start calling me a feminist. So, students are calling me a feminist, these men are calling me a feminist. So it means I am going to capitalize on this label, do everything feminists are known to do. I shall ask the odd questions here. So I insist the man who made her pregnant, needs to be known. And I said, am single, I have just accepted this job; I haven’t signed anywhere that I am not going to be pregnant.
Neither have I signed that I am going to get children from a husband. Neither have I signed that I won’t abort. I know it is illegal in this country, but this woman, its true she aborted. She did it because she could not afford a baby. In this country, there are women who can afford to have a proper abortion, but she did it the way she did because she was poor. So it shows that you pay purely, so she had to take whatever concoction she took to help her abort. The white guy on the management committee went home and told the wife, hey, here we have an African woman who is telling off these African men. Unfortunately she died later. She went home for three months on suspension and she is reinstated. Unfortunately she died because whatever she had taken, she never got proper medical attention.

So word goes round that so and so has been reinstated. So my fame was going on, both negative and positive. Because they had called me a feminist, I just said I was going to capitalize on that. So, I continue on the management committee and I made sure I read all the information before hand because as a woman, I really needed to know what is going on so that when I asked questions or whatever, they couldn’t say it’s just a woman.

Here Dr Mombo figured out that the best way to deal with her situation was to take upon herself the terminology that was being used to describe her and use it to her advantage, do whatever they believed feminists do. She thus decided to crusade for the betterment of the women on campus, both students and employees. She also learnt survival tactics that she utilized in handling the board, being very prepared for every meeting so that she would contribute from knowledge rather than ignorance. In addition, she attempted to stand up for women, even where she was aware that the woman was in the wrong, she felt the need to stand up for her because the man wasn’t being punished, yet the woman in this case hadn’t gotten pregnant alone. For Dr Mombo, the realization that now she was in a position to do something about women, for women and for the entire community as far as gender relations are concerned propelled her to undertake a new crusade with vigor: that of increasing the numbers of women in the institution, as well as advocating for them:

The Rentokil woman who brought the services said when she first came to ask about it, she was told that college had no women. Which was only partly true because even if they were only ten, they were still women. So now, then I begin having, I realize women, this is a male college. We need to mobilize the women, so I invited them to my house for fellowship. Those who want to come would come.. In my classes, if I was doing history,
it had to have a component about women. If I was doing theology, I would even start with a quote by a woman theologian. So the feminist thing is going on. But there is something they are also liking in the feminist thing. First, it didn’t go well with the hierarchy of men. My leadership is challenged, for some people its a breath of fresh air, for others you are still a woman. I remember my first graduation charge, during graduation as the academic dean I had to give a charge. And my charge was to the effect when they went to serve in the community, don’t tell women to persevere when they are being battered, ask why they are being beaten and rescue them. I was not going to apologize for being a woman.

The Rentokil woman she is talking about here came in regards to providing sanitary disposal for women’s bathrooms, which they didn’t have prior to Dr Mombo taking over as academic dean. In this quote, she illustrates the paradox of her situation: on the one hand, there were those who appreciated having a woman’s touch in leadership. On the other hand, the majority, and more so the hierarchy as in the board governing the institution, did not like having a woman in such an important position. But she had come to serve the community, and she was determined to prepare clergy, both men and women, who would serve the communities they represented and who would be sensitive to gender relationships in those communities. Dr Mombo had made an important decision: she wasn’t going to apologize for being a woman. Instead, like the other women leaders in this study, she found a way to use her womanly traits to serve the institution and the community, albeit by attempting to change that institution and community. To increase the numbers of women in the college, she had to raise funds for their tuition and living expenses, and sensitive women to their roles in church and the place of getting theological training. She also admitted women who would otherwise not be welcome in the college such as single mothers; ultimately, it meant challenging the laid down rules and regulations that barred women from coming to the college.

In addition to supporting her family, Dr Mombo also decided to extend her mothering traits by fostering three children, boys aged between 9 and 15 years whom she educates and
provides a home to. This was a counter-cultural move on her part because society expects her to get married then have children, and after having her own blood children, to go ahead and provide a home to children from the extended family who for one reason or another needed a home. Instead, she had decided that she had the financial capacity, the nurturing instincts and the commitment to go ahead and foster these children and give them a safe home. Her servant-leader stance extended from her public roles to her private one as a foster mother.

Deconstructing Patriarchy

Dr Mombo comprehended the contradictions in her personal situation as a woman leader, as well as in the wider social construction of gender in general. She argued that both men and women had been socialized into patriarchal constructions of gender, such that in advocating for change, often times she found resistance in both men and women. As such, her work involved helping women understand the roots of their worldview and behavior even as she advanced change strategies such as increasing their numbers in the theological college and supporting them financially through scholarships. In her advocacy and action, she was not pro-women or anti-men, rather, she felt that it was necessary to bring about change for the betterment of the entire college as well as the communities that both men and women clergy would be serving. She illustrated her experiences with an almost humorous example, if it weren’t so pathetic:

Gender is not just a women’s problem. Understanding that patriarchy affects both men and women, and even men suffer under its effects… But being single, it’s the mystery of who sleeps in your bed. But it’s not how well you perform, but who sleeps in your bed. You have no identity unless you are Mrs. And even when you are reverend, you should be reverend Mrs. And a doctor, you should be doctor Mrs. Why cant they use just one of them? Using both means that those who only have one title are not reverend enough or doctor enough. And that second title sometimes is used against me. They would stand up and the one who has doctor Mrs. is given an aura of Mrs. And this doctor without, someone would say, I wonder how someone can serve in this ministry without a husband.
Dr Mombo’s experiences with discrimination based on her marital status meant that even though she was qualified for her role as academic dean, she often faced resistance to her authority as a leader. Men as well as women questioned her ability based on her lack of her husband. But this did not stop her from doing her best to serve a community that is resistant to her authority. One of her sources of support has been the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, an association and network of women theologians from across the continent of Africa. On her arrival at St Paul’s, Dr Mombo helped to inaugurate a Circle chapter, bringing together women students, faculty and staff from the college as well as other women theologians, pastors and priests who work in church-related organizations. The activities of the Circle have resulted in St Paul’s offering the first ever master’s program in HIV/AIDS pastoral counseling in Africa, a very timely preparation program to help deal with the scourge of the pandemic in the continent. In addition, it has offered support and networking opportunities for all the women concerned, and a place where they can discuss and come up with strategies for survival in their male-dominated religious work places. The St Paul’s circle birthed what they metaphorically called the ‘Square of concerned male theologians’, a group of male priests, pastors and theologians who are willing to join in the struggle towards making religious institutions more gender-sensitive for the betterment of society.

As the highest-ranking woman in theological training circles in Kenya, Dean Mombo represented the country and continent in several important international commissions, such as the Eames Commission which produced the Windsor Report; the commission was charged with producing a report and recommendation for the Anglican Commission worldwide after the New Hampshire Diocese appointed a gay bishop. Dr Mombo was of the opinion that whereas
homosexuality is a hot and divisive topic in the church, social and political circles, in ten years
time, it will not be an issue.

**Resonance**

Dr Mombo’s life has been fueled by righteous indignation against injustice, beginning
with her own experiences under the hands of a relative, continuing through her many years of
work and leadership in Christian institutions. The anger that she felt against the injustices
perpetrated against women in Christian institutions and churches energized action to level the
playing ground and where possible change the modus operandi of the organizations she worked
in. For example, she contributed to the ordination of women in the church she served by her
constant activism for the same, and proved that she wasn’t doing it for selfish reasons by not
seeking ordination for herself. She also managed to increase the number of women in theological
training, to ensure that the excuse for not giving them positions of leadership in the churches
would not be that there were no theologically qualified candidates. She has demonstrated by her
life and example that persistence pays: it took many years for any of the changes she was
attempting to bring about to actually take place but she never gave up. She also demonstrated
deep resiliency in the face of amazing challenges, some so personal and humiliating yet she went
on unflinchingly doing what she believed was her calling: serving Christian institutions to
prepare leaders for the church in Africa.

In her personal walk, Dr Mombo chose to take a difficult path by fostering three children
in a society where that is counter-cultural. Her faith is thoroughly actionable, her beliefs present
and evident in all her words and deeds. She is a mentor to many others, helping women persist in
spite of the challenges they face in Christian institutions and churches by coaching them and
leading by example. Whereas she herself had no mentor, she recognized the importance of
mentoring others. She also recognized the place for networks and worked in collaboration with other women theologians to fight injustices in Christian institutions and churches, as well as provide direction for difficult issues like HIV/AIDS counseling and care. Her story would make any leader, man or woman to think seriously about quitting or giving up in realization that persisting may actually be the wiser though more difficult course of action.
Dr. Abuom was another participant who I didn’t know and hadn’t heard about until I started making inquiries about possible women leaders to interview. Reverend Joyce recommended her because of her position as the Lay Africa President of the World Council of Churches (WCC), a position of ecumenical oversight and direction for all Christian churches that are members of the WCC. Dr. Abuom is also the executive director of Taapco, a human and institutional development-consulting firm, though she hardly has any time to spend there because of her rather busy schedule. In the time I was in the field, Dr. Abuom was out of the country more frequently that she was within the national borders. For instance, we met for the first time in early June to set up an appointment; this could not take place before mid July because she was away in the intervening period. After our first appointment, she traveled to Sudan, and Nigeria before our second appointment a few weeks later. She couldn’t participate in the focus group because she had to be present at the memorial service for Dr. Garang, the Sudanese revolutionary leader who had served as vice president for just a month before his sudden death.

When I met with Dr. Abuom for our first conversation, I was impressed by how easily she jumped into the meat of the study. I had earlier given her all the documentation supporting the study, but unlike everybody else, she seemed to have perused through the consent letter. Our conversation began something like this:

I was saying that when you look at the continent and in this country in particular, I can see the resilience of the African women in terms of economic survival and ensuring that in spite of all the bartering of the family structure, she holds the unit together. She becomes the pillar. To leave her at the pictorial image of a beast is not telling the whole story.
This was the part of the conversation that I got into the tape recorder after I stopped her to ask whether I could use the tape recorder. She launched into deconstructing the history that has been provided in textbooks and the dominant discourse about the status of women in Africa by attesting to the resiliency of the African woman, which became sort of the theme of the whole conversation. Thirty minutes into this discourse, I was able to steer her back to her early beginnings.

Defining Moments

Dr Abuom was born and brought up in the rift valley province of Kenya, specifically in the Nandi Hills area of peasant parentage. She remembers watching her African Christian upbringing with nostalgia:

I grew up in the hills of Nandi. And, I come from a very strong Christian family, two girls and one brother. My mother had basic education but she couldn’t continue. She trained to be a community development assistant. We are only three, but I have sisters who are not biological. In terms of schools, I went to a missionary boarding school, in the border of Nandi and western. It was a Pentecostal, Canadian Pentecostal boarding primary school. Then came to Limuru girls, and found the Australian missionary ladies

Dr Abuom talked about her family structure, including sisters who are not biological, suggesting that her family included children who had been added to the family, perhaps poor relatives who were adopted into the family. This is quite common in African families, whereby one finds biological children, as well as near and distant relatives all living as children of that family. After her primary and high school education in Christian schools, Agnes Abuom proceeded to the University of Nairobi whereupon she embarked on a short-lived student leadership and political engagement career. Short lived because she was soon expelled:

I was expelled from Nairobi for leadership reasons that’s how come I went to Uppsala, Sweden. We had the first peaceful demonstration in the universities in this country was organized by Ooki Ombaka, myself, and four others, Kariuki, Munene, I was the only woman. We led a strike. Actually it started with the faculty of architecture where the
Danish dean would pass only Indians and not Africans. These Africans would go outside to Europe and pass. At one stage of marking there was a problem. And we staged this peaceful sit in and it coincided with an election year of 1974.

Dr Abuom’s retelling of her expulsion from University of Nairobi was as a matter of historical fact, but this was actually a defining moment in her life. In those days, there were only two public universities in Kenya, Nairobi and Kenyatta. As such, to be expelled from one meant that her chances at acquiring higher education had been curtailed. Expulsion indicates that she was known for being a radical student leader, and was thus targeted for discrimination by the then government which was very intolerant of dissent. After expulsion from University of Nairobi, she and her comrades embarked on campaigning for their leaders of choice for the 1974 parliamentary elections, choosing leaders whom they felt supported their social justice goals. The comrades she mentioned above are all historical figures in terms of fighting for social justice in Kenya, both within government and as activists within the civic commons. During this period, she was also involved in the National Council of Churches of Kenya’s solidarity with south Africa movement’ a group whose focus was on supporting south Africans efforts at freedom from apartheid. She got a job with a local Christian publication titled Target, and worked here until she left to complete her studies in Uppsala. She said that Target editor gave her a job because no one else would touch her with a ten-foot pole because of her political and social justice activism.

During her university education period in Sweden, Agnes enjoyed the exposure she experienced by being in an egalitarian political system and student centered learning system. As such, what had been meant for evil, the expulsion from University of Nairobi would later turn into a blessing; a chance to travel abroad and pursue her education as well as being exposed to a different social system. She expressed these experiences thus:
The Swedes were a very good solidarity nation with various countries. So exposure to solidarity and what people can do about the oppressed and marginalized. Also exposure to a small but democratic country where you don’t see Mr. prime minister, a very egalitarian system unlike the Americans. I got involved with the Lutheran church. So my education is basically from two cultures, the Swedish culture and the Kenyan-British culture, which are very different cultures. The British you are pushed through the system. The Swedes you are left to organize yourself.

Critical Ecclesiastical Leadership

Dr. Abuom was of the opinion that how she got involved in church work would interest me, so she said:

And my coming into church work will interest you. I went to Zimbabwe as a research fellow for two years. And most of the exiles were there, Micere Mugo again I found her there. So I wanted to be part of an academic fraternity in Kenya so I applied to Kenyatta and was taken on in the faculty of history. And so I came and before I could settle down, I was behind bars in Nyayo house here. Because coming from out, and coming from Zimbabwe, we were fighting for democracy. It was actually a woman who sold me out. It was a woman who sold me out, you can't believe it, you know. So I was put in a cell, it was a false accusation so they entered into a nole prosequi but I then couldn’t get a job. So I was sitting there and Mukuru knew that I couldn’t get a job. I remember sitting in Cyprus with Kariuki who was to be the bishop of Kajiado. We were sitting there and he is saying, you can't survive outside the system and since you can't get a job, I think you must get into the church. So, I came into the church. And he said you need to do justice issues and we worked together. But halfway it was changed. Because Mukuru said it might be risky for you to do justice issues. But Kago argues and says we need a competent person and all that. I end up going into development but doing more or less the same thing. But since then I am still circulating in the church.

In essence, Dr. Abuom ended up in church circles because she was not acceptable elsewhere, she was too radical to fit in the system, especially in the higher education arena of the late seventies and early eighties. At this period in Kenya’s history, there was a lot of unrest on university campuses, with students rioting and throwing stones as they dissented against government excesses. The government did not tolerate dissent and criticism, and lecturers who dared speak against the system were detained for lengthy periods without trial. As such, with her history of activism as a student, Dr. Abuom was unacceptable in that system. However, she could fit in the church, because the church has since the mid seventies into the current period
been the most vocal institution against government corruption, human rights abuses and mismanagement of resources. As such, Dr. Abuom found a ready home within the Anglican Church circles utilizing her training in history and development studies to serve the church, local communities and as an active critic of the government. However, Dr. Abuom not only critiqued the government for its abuses, but also critiqued and sought to change the church for its failures too:

So repression, again what do you want to say? If you look at the struggle for liberation, it does not profile women leaders. Look at this dispensation and look at what women did, but listen to the names, listen to the stories, look at the papers. They will not profile. Even in the church, when the church was struggling, it wasn’t only Bishop Gitari and Bishop Muge and Bishop Okullu. I wrote a paper sometime back where I said the struggle for democracy by the church was good, but the prophetic voice was only limited to a few voices. Yet the struggle was a broad based struggle. Again when you want to look honestly at political leadership, even where women have contributed, listen even to Mau Mau, listen even to pre-Mau Mau, you will find that our history has gaps, and they are not spoken about.

Faith: the Nyanjirus who are not mentioned.

Dr. Abuom: Yeah, and they are there in every community. They are there in the community. I mean, must Wambui fight for herself? Irrespective of her personal life, she was a freedom fighter. Why did she have to speak for herself? Why do we only speak of the Onekos and whatever?

Faith: And her book is not available in Kenya.

Dr. Abuom: That is it. If it was a man’s book and whatever, it would be available. If you look at the church, look at the women who have struggled as deacons and priests. You would be surprised. But the creative things they are doing are never told. They are taken over by the men. So, you can go whichever side, we have to really claim, it’s a reclamation, it’s a restoration process. And when we talk about Nehemiah and rebuilding the wall, we have to construct a new wall, but we have to deconstruct some in order to reconstruct others. The mind frame that needs to be deconstructed in order to be reconstructed. So for me, Nehemiah is not just about reconstruction. I would say we need to deconstruct church structures so that they become people structures, and build, others we need to reconstruct because they have been broken. I would use the same analogy for leadership, because there is certainly the things that need to be deconstructed and others to be reconstructed. And at the heart of it is the mindset of the people. And let me tell you, we don’t exercise leadership the way it is now presented to us in books. Because,
how will I be a leader, when even at my age and reverends age, you still have a grown up child who needs your attention full time.

Dr Abuom perceived the abuses, excesses and gender-related injustices that existed not only in the government, but in the church, and in society as a whole. The Nehemiah she was referring to in this passage is the biblical story of how the prophet Nehemiah lead the exiled Israelites in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem that had been destroyed by the invading Assyrians. She did not need to explain that to me because as Christian leaders, we have a common vocabulary. As such, a reference to Nehemiah relates to the process of leading a reconstruction of broken down structures. However, Dr. Abuom was of the opinion that before the broken down gender structures could be reconstructed, they needed to be deconstructed, to be understood as the product of social mindset. Most critical in her view is the gender gap that exists in social discourse about men and women’s contribution to development, social justice and community. She felt that women had been left out of the discourse – that when stories of social justice activism were told in the church and in the nation as a whole, only the stories of men would be told, leaving out women’s contributions. That could explain why I had never heard of her prior to beginning the field work for this project, yet I had heard about all the men she mentioned. That is, all the bishops who had constantly critiqued the government, some to the point of being killed in freak accidents, and the men who had been detained by the colonial government due to their freedom fighting activities. Nowhere in this discourse and written history did we ever hear the stories of women such as Agnes Abuom, Wahu Kaara, Muthoni Likimani or even Wambui Otieno who they all refer to, in relation to their freedom fighting activities in the first or second liberation movements.
Deconstructing Patriarchy

Dr. Abuom recognized the social structures that keep women down, that hinder women’s ascent upon the corporate, ecclesiastical or government ladder:

We did a profile and we said, we have a crisis. We are like waiting for women to become leaders after they have nurtured and sent the children out of the home. But that would be too late, it is too late. But its because of the models. Look at the church, when do we convene meetings, now it’s the time to start going (it was about 7 pm). Are you not making it difficult for that woman who has a family? Where will she grow her leadership style, where will she be pointed out, where will she be recognized?

Dr. Abuom also considered the many struggles for women after they have bypassed the social, cultural, political and economic glass ceilings to arrive at a leadership position. Using her own story and those of others that she knows intimately, she discussed the struggle to have their authority recognized:

So leadership cannot be nurtured in a vacuum, there has to be a platform, there has to be space. The spaces we have today, if I didn’t have the example of my mother, if I didn’t go to school, and as I was telling her, even now as the African president, I have to fight for my recognition. And you know what they say. That bishop said, “when it comes to sitting, that one we know she will represent”. It’s like grudgingly accepting the position of a person, the space of a person. I give you the example that women will go through in the church. When I became the Africa president, the first for this region of Eastern Africa, West Africa has already, but men not women, I came to the national council, and I told them, we were having an executive committee meeting. Normally we pray for people who are in leadership. So I asked them, could you also pray for me. They never did. They never did. Why? Because I am a woman. Karimi Kinoti has been the coordinator of a club, she is a young woman, maybe a little older than you. She has never received the recognition that she deserves. She has built a fellowship of churches in Eastern and the Great Lakes region that is functional, for peace, that is the most functional group. But if you talk to Karimi today, she is a young woman leader, the struggle of recognition. We would go for a meeting here, the Sudan celebration and at the cathedral, nobody mentioned any of us. So I tell Karimi, its not for man to recognize. Let our work speak for itself. It’s a big struggle. Not just a struggle of recognition but where possible even the spaces get narrowed for you. Its like its automatic when archbishop has a function for the general secretary of NCCK to go but its not automatic that you have a president of WCC in your church. It’s not automatic that you will be invited. So that creates problems. And that’s why you see it pushes women into this fighting mode that also ends up being counter productive because you only affirm what their prejudices are. And because they control media they just portray you as such. The politicians keep blocking the 30% representation in parliament because they can’t handle even the few
that they have 6% currently. You see, the Kenyan woman, in the midst of struggle and survival has become so strong that the man is threatened. We have got to break this cycle of imbalance because women leadership is not to repeat the mistakes of men leadership. That is what I am saying. I want to be in a space where my father, you asked me about my family, my father would wake up and make tea when we were children and even today when I go home, he will wake up and make tea, without people having to say that the wife is controlling. 

_Huyu amewekwa mkono na bibi._ The moment you grow up in that culture of complementarity, and you know why it was like that. You know sometimes I say we lost that revival spirit, where people referred to each other as _ndugu._ In the revival, yes. The balance between men and women in the revival. We have one couple around Kapsabet who are around 100. Even today they still call each other _ndugu na dada._ But that never took root in the church.

Dr. Abuom discussed the struggles for recognition of authority as women in leadership, and how that sometimes results in women leaders becoming very aggressive, a counterproductive stance. This struggle is in the church, in political arena, in human rights arena, every possible space that women occupy as leaders is riddled with these contradictions: they have positions but not authority. In addition, Dr. Abuom credits her upbringing, her parents with modeling for her a culture of complementarity where her father could and still does what are otherwise considered female roles such as cooking when need arises. For Dr. Abuom, this culture of complementarity has been irreparably altered, to a culture of competition:

The second one is the culture, the identity, the African women was always consulted. We don’t have kingdoms in Kenya but whatever the case, when decisions were made, the women had their say, perhaps at home before the men went out to make decisions but they did have their say. So some may say that Lucy is crazy but she is watching out for the president. So when we look at the African palaver, the men would be in the middle, the women would be at the back. But the discussion don’t start in that palaver, the discussions were already done in the house and the second sitter has already stated her position. And when they notice that the men are off tangent, then you will observe how they relate. When they say the power behind the throne, the British talk about the power behind the throne, but in Africa the reality is that the power resides behind the throne. And this is the woman. Even when you look at marriage, look at the muthoniwa processes. Even in ensuring that immortality and continuity of life goes on. Who else will you look at except the kikuyu and the Luhya. Look at the child festivities, it’s the women who lead. Look at the Kikuyu and Luo homesteads. In the polygamous set up, every homestead that exists, who is the pillar? It is the woman. When this man comes to Wambura’s home, or to Njoki’s home. Look at the property division. Take the Maasai. People say, o the Maasai are not gender sensitive. It is not until we got the commercial
economy that the Maasai woman was completely destroyed. The Maasai woman, all the milk products are hers, all the hides are hers, she determines what to do with them. All the animals she gets at the wedding are hers.

Again Dr. Abuom deconstructs social structures as they exist today by returning to history, to the pre-colonial and pre-Christian era when many ethnic cultures in Kenya and Africa were constructed along dual-sex or complementary gender role set-ups. Her comment about the Maasai came as a complete surprise to me, having spoken with two Maasai women (Ole Marima and Nangurai), I had heard a very different story about culturally mandated abuses of women. Instead, Dr. Abuom with her clear understanding of African history was telling me that the current status quo isn’t strictly speaking cultural – rather, it is the result of traditional culture’s violent interaction with capitalistic economy. The same could be said of other traditional cultures in Africa which are critiqued for being too harsh to women; it is the changes in social structures that have created the conflicts and contradictions. Yet this discourse is missing from our history books, it is not the story that is told about our traditional cultures. Dr. Abuom was attempting to help me understand how this came to be, that what we call traditional culture today is actually the confluence of real traditional culture with market paradigm that supports competition rather than cooperation. For Dr. Abuom, what we have is confusion and contradiction:

We are cultureless. We are actually cultureless in the sense that we are aping everything. Because, look at today’s draft constitution which says division of property should be equal between the two genders of children. I tell you, in the Nandi culture, if I was unmarried and a woman, I would inherit part of my father’s property. In this context, the boys are saying no. Because they have taken on something they don’t know. But that was uncontested. It was uncontested.

The flux state in the cultural transition from traditional to modernity has left the African communities at the point where we are neither traditional nor modern, the norms now practiced are not sanctioned by modernity or traditional; that is what has created all the chaos that we see now because people behave as ‘market’ dictates, or anything goes. It is no wonder Maasai as the
worst example, but only the worst, every ethnic group in Kenya does it to some extent, have commoditized women onto an expendable good.

The alternative as contested by Dr. Abuom is to deconstruct and reconstruct social structures, to decolonize our mindsets, to free ourselves from mental slavery and begin the process of self-emancipation and self-definition necessary in creating a just community. Thus:

That is why we need to decolonize the men. We need to decolonize the men from the prison of wrong false notions and ideas about themselves and about their own communities. Because, why? Number one, these very men are not able to actually exercise power and authority fully in the context they are in because they are also captives of another force. Neither can they do it in the family fully because they have lost it and are living a false reality. So we need to look at decolonization as a process to change several realities. And that is what the women were saying during our initial gender training in the Anglican Church. Women in Nairobi and central were saying, we know what the problem is. It is not us, it is the men. The other decolonization that is critical is of the woman herself. Especially those of us who have been alienated through education. The higher up in education you went like me, the more alienated you became. So you don’t belong and the modern so-called culture that we are in, we cannot exercise authority and leadership, can we? We cant, so we are worse off than my mother and my grandmother. You see my grandmother was an evangelist. And she moved beyond community. She had more power than I have. Yes. She had more leadership. More voice than I do. Because the way they related with her husband. For me now we are in this competitive enemy like culture. So we are both losers. Because in the competitive culture that we are in, my husband becomes envious, it becomes conflictual because the woman cannot go beyond (the man). Whereas in the traditional culture, you could lead. As long as your traits were there and there were clear boundaries. So anyway, for me decolonization is of the mind, and that’s why I started by looking at pan-Africanism. Because the parallel agenda of pan-Africanism was social cultural liberation. And, one Ghanaian young person told me today, slavery is not political. Slavery is of the mind. And some of us educated women we are offering our minds to be enslaved because of the leadership patterns we are attempting to utilize; why should she, if she becomes an archbishop go into that leadership mode which is not constructive, it is not inclusive, it is not transformative, it is not a change friendly leadership model?

Dr. Abuom advocated for a complete social overhaul, the decolonization of both men and women because patriarchal structures are kept in place by both genders. She advanced the notion that unless there is complete overhaul, the possibility of a return to a more complimentary culture where men and women lead because they are capable rather than because they are men or
women will not be feasible. As such, men need to be decolonized, women need to be decolonized, society needs to be decolonized and reconstructed along socially just lines. In addition, she advocates for leadership that is more constructive rather than destructive, inclusive rather than exclusionary, transformative rather than maintaining an unjust status quo, and change friendly to allow for social transformation.

Spirited Tempered Radical and Servant Leader

Listening to Dr. Abuom, reading the transcripts, and reading other articles that she has written on the subject of women and development, I was struck by the fact that she is the epitome of tempered radicalism. She has been engaged in initiating change within the church, starting with the Anglican Church in Kenya, the National Council of Churches of Kenya, and eventually to the World Council of Churches. Her interest and engagement with development and justice issues has been consistent throughout her adult life, beginning with her campus activism. In addition, Dr. Abuom represents the crop of women leaders who believe in serving their community, their nation, their continent and humanity at large by utilizing their skills, knowledge and expertise. She articulated her view of leadership as she gave me advise on how to lead and how not to lead:

Desist from the leadership models of men, because that is the killer assumption, the killer factor today for most of us, because we want to show that we are strong, we are powerful. Look at what Manduli has been doing, it’s a shame. I was telling a friend of mine this morning after we talked about this, there is something special about me, because God made me into what he wanted. I was saying to her, I was just mentoring her, be a woman. The world needs caring leadership and nurturing leadership. It doesn’t want this killing, cutting each other’s feet off. The world needs the consultative kind of leadership not the solo approach, the hero. We have gone beyond the stage of heroism. For me that is one of my dreams.

Here Dr. Abuom contrasted her view of leadership with one woman who was in the news every day for several weeks, Orie Rogo Manduli, a self proclaimed politician and the former
executive director of the National Non-Governmental Council. Mrs. Manduli had locked herself up in her NGO Council offices and was refusing to leave after she was asked by the governing council to step down and give way for investigations into allegations of mismanagement. Her behavior made a mockery of women in leadership especially as she threatened the government minister in the media, saying she is not afraid of any man and could easily beat him up. This kind of leadership is not the type advocated and practiced by Dr. Abuom, it made for a good example of how not to lead. Instead, Dr. Abuom advocated for an ethic of care, and the use of negotiation and consultation rather than the heroic lone ranger approach. As far as she is concerned, caring and nurturing leadership is needed the world over, and it is a distinctively African womanist style of leading, though very few women leaders in positions of authority actually practice it. Instead, most women leaders lead like men, Mrs. Manduli being the most extreme example. In the above quote, Dr. Abuom also connects her style of leadership to God “God made me into what he wanted”; that is, both her tempered radicalism and servant-leadership are because God has shaped her that way. She felt that her leadership, and the kind of leadership she would teach others is a combination of biblical, feminine and cultural traits:

But my view is to look at leadership biblically, but also calve out cultural traits some of which I have told you. The transformative leader, the leadership that can manage change. Because if there is something that you can see in women, it’s their adaptability. They are able to adapt. You look at situations today, the man loses a job and becomes depressed. The women loses a job and puts sukuma wiki (collard greens) on the street (market) and keeps moving. Life goes on. Life goes right on. Not rigid ways of doing things.

Resonance

Dr. Abuom practices and advocates for a leadership that is transformational, adaptable, relevant, biblical, cultural, nurturing, caring, consultative, and just. She felt that the church, the political arena, government, and other social institutions were all run on a leadership style that
was counter-productive, that did not meet the needs of the community or nation. She was of the opinion that a thorough look at traditional African culture, the bible and women’s survival mechanisms could breed a new form of leadership that is needed in Kenya, Africa and the world as a whole. That is, a leadership that would result in meeting the justice and development needs of the world’s marginalized, as well as run institutions, corporations and governments to meet real human needs.
The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, to preach provision to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to procure the year of the Lord’s justice
(Isaiah 61:1-2, Paraphrased)

Before I embarked on this research journey, I had never heard of Wahu Kaara. This could be because by the time she started gaining national and international notoriety, I was in the United States and missed all her appearances in the media. It could also be because I had not spent much time on the human and political rights agenda in Kenya. I knew I was not alone in my ignorance because every time I told my friends and even some of the other participants that I was interviewing Wahu Kaara, they would ask me who she was. This was in contrast to people like Muthoni Likimani, Muthoni Wanyeki, Charity Ngilu and Beth Mugo whom just about everyone I talked to knew. Whatever the case, I only got to know about Wahu Kaara from my liaison who said she was a must-interview woman leader. While we were working on getting an appointment with her, I started to research her in the media outlets. I found out that Wahu had just participated in debt and poverty relief campaigns in the United Kingdom, the most recent activity being campaigning at Gleneagles during the 2005 G8 leaders summit. When I went to interview Dr. Abuom, she also talked about Wahu’s activities and engagement with human rights, debt relief and poverty eradication, indicating that I should definitely speak with her. Dr. Abuom also suggested that we should have a meeting as four of us, Dr Abuom, Wahu and Reverend, and I to discuss collaborations in leadership development of younger women, and other possible initiatives.

I met Wahu at her office at All Africa Conference of Churches where she was the Millennium Campaign Ecumenical Director and Global Call Against Poverty (GCAP)
coordinator. I remembered my conversation with Reverend and Dr Abuom regarding how simple Wahu is in her dress – they were right on target. Wahu had barely tidy cornrows on her head, a skirt suit with a sweater on top and black shoes. She looked like what my generation of people describes as ‘school teacher attire’, the motherly, matronly and gaudy look of our schoolteachers. However, when she opened her mouth, there was no mistaking the zeal, knowledge and passion for social and economic justice that spewed forth.

Defining Moments

Wahu was born in the early fifties in the Rift Valley province of Kenya, where she also undertook her primary and high school education. In speaking of her early beginnings, she said:

My beginnings, I was born and brought up in the Rift Valley, and that’s where I interacted or was confronted with the dynamics of social contradictions. You remember our history very well, even Kenya had an experience of what I would call apartheid. And RV is part of the white highlands, so I interacted with those racial contradictions observing my grandparents, and parents and me. And one very critical time I don’t forget, I think I was about six or seven years old. I saw a young white boy coming to my grandparents who were squatters. And we had gone there for a family celebration. And when this white boy came, he put everybody into disarray. I could see my grandfather and grandmother, old people running around from him, and he came and broke the calabash that held the local brew, which to me was very sacred in the way I had been brought up and whatever function was going on. So I, to me he was just a child like I am a child. So I asked him, why doesn’t he have respect for the old people, and why would he break that calabash? And my grandmother and my uncle were frantic, they couldn’t believe it including my parents, its as if I had done the worst. But at least the young boy got very shaken, and subsequent to that, ironically, the white settler had such respect for my grandmother. And he would even come to my grandmother’s hut to eat with her and want to know where I came from, and really whether I was the grandchild, and what I do. But they also knew my mother because she had grown up in that land. The only advantage I had was that I was born in Eldoret town. So the question of seeing whites here and there and other people had already given me that capacity perhaps to find that there is no nothing that I don’t have that another person has. So that set the ground for my questioning the social dynamics in terms of social relationships.

Indeed Wahu’s penchant for questioning social realities began at that early age and has continued to date. She talked about questioning and critiquing the subject matter that was taught to her in primary school, challenging the status distinctions in high school, and soaking in the
wisdom and experiences of her professors at university, many of whom wrote some of East
Africa’s greatest books about the regions colonial experience. AS she described these
developmental experiences;

When I went to school, it was even worse when we were learning about slave trade and
slavery and who discovered what. I remember as early as primary school when I
interacted with who discovered Mt Kilimanjaro and Mt Kenya, and we would be told it
was so and so. And innocently I would ask my teachers, discovered? And I would look in
the dictionary what discovery meant, then I would say, but you want to say that the
African people, who even gave, like for example the Akamba gave the name to Mt Kenya
as Ke’enyia, so how come it needed Rebmann to come and discover? So that was my
background. That now was perfected when I went furthering my studies. And my A-
levels history and literature and at university perfected that kind of thinking. And I went
to the university at a time when real learning for making critical minds and critical
thinking was enhanced. I was a student of Ngugi wa Thiongo and Maina wa Kinyatu was
my history teacher. Okot P’ Bitek and others. At the university I found my space and
developed a clear ideological stand and I made a decision that I also need to study so that
I can contribute in making history during my lifetime.

Leadership for Social Justice

These early educational and life experiences perfected in Wahu the kind of critical
thinking and engagement with social realities that have been the cornerstone of her life as a
leader for social and economic justice. After university, she taught history and literature in
several high schools, always aiming at preparing students as she herself had been prepped, to be
critically engaged with the realities of life in post-colonial Kenya. She would later become a
principal before she lost her job due to her engagement with Kenya’s Second Liberation
Movement: the movement that would result in the entry of multiparty democracy and enlarged
the political involvement of women.

Wahu was married to a fellow social justice activist, Mr. Kaara who died a few years ago
and they had four children. At one point, Mr. Kaara was in exile in Tanzania because of his
involvement in the Second Liberation, particularly his activism in demanding for political
freedoms and rights. Wahu herself could have been an exile, were it not for the actions of an elder and board member of the school she was heading, who defended her against accusations of treasonable activities.

Wahu has been engaged in social justice leadership at the local, national, regional and international levels. At the local level she has been involved in community activities, including her work as a teacher who was also involved in community development. At the national level, Wahu was invited to participate in the constitutional review process undertaken in Kenya between 2000 and 2003 in which:

I was a delegate at the national constitutional meeting at Bomas and I took a clear position to defend the people driven constitution. Subsequently Katiba (constitution) Watch and even now I still prescribe to a people-driven constitution.

Wahu believes and is totally committed to fighting for economic justice from both a national and global platform. To this effect, she has been involved in a series of Social Forums, movements whose priorities relate to agitating for economic justice especially for Global South nations. She explained:

Globally I have been a key debt campaigner through a platform here in the country called Kenya debt relief network, and in total the question of economic justice. And that’s how I perhaps modestly call myself global social and economic justice activist. Currently I am very instrumental in the process of the World Social Forum through the African social forum, Kenya Social Forum and our local Huruma Social Forum. We are going to host the world social forum in 2007.

Faith: what is the World Social Forum?

The World Social Forum is involved in looking for another world, build a just world because in the current world everybody is quite unjust. And, the social forum tries to critique the liberal paradigm as it exists and tries to engage in alternatives that people creatively are coming up with, like you are trying to argue from your observation here, what the ordinary people do is never documented. And the social forum is keen in trying to build synergy of the emerging alternatives for sustenance of life. Because the current paradigm its clear is serving the interest of finance capital only for profit, and at the level we are in, it is actually a great danger to life sustenance. So the World Social Forum
emerged as a platform to begin to build that synergy and it was motivated by wanting to critique what happens every beginning of year at the World Economic Forum in Switzerland to design and to decide and to evaluate on how they are going to continue perfecting the current paradigm in terms of the economic models that serve the neo-liberal agenda that facilitates finance capital for profit. So, that is the process and the key thing is that people are agreeable that another world is possible.

Wahu was excited about the possibilities inherent in the paradigm shift offered via the channel of the World Social Forum mechanisms, because she felt that this could be beginning of an alternative model of social and economic relations between the Southern nations and their Northern counterparts. She was of the opinion that here was the chance to change the status quo, and whereas the World Social Forum is not a religious movement, it offered her a spiritual platform- a platform to turn the world back again into what God intended. She explained:

So for me this is a lifetime achievement now I can rest in peace because the World Social Forum is a platform that articulates nothing other than justice, economic justice, social justice, different models of power relations, of partnership, of equity, of respect. In other words a world that sees value of each and every human being to manifest the purpose for which they were created by God. Because I am also a believer and I know that God did not just create just for the sake of creating us, and the kind of things we are trying to interrogate in Africa, it is not natural, it is not god-given. It is created because poverty is a created scarcity and if it is a created scarcity it can be dealt with and dealing with it in exactly what you have observed our ordinary women doing…

The World Social Forum (WSF) was the platform in which the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP) was articulated. She was excited that she was part of the group that convinced the international organizations to come to Africa as their next convention venue. She hoped that this would give Africans a chance to contribute to the rest of the world on issues of social justice leadership, to contribute from African women’s experiences of creative and resourceful leadership.
Radical Servant Leader

For Wahu, the WSF and its local manifestations were a platform to exercise what she explained as the purpose for which God created humanity; to live lives of dignity and respect. In her understanding, social justice is a divine imperative necessitated by the need to solve social inequality and scarcity problems. In the quote above, she made that connection between theistic spirituality and social justice. The agenda of fighting for social justice also involved being a certain kind of leader, specifically, a leader whose motivation for leading is in order to serve. She explained this:

It is the heritage that we have; the heritage we have of the preparedness of engaging with life, that heritage, the remnant is still there just like I am trying to tell you I watched in my grandmother and mother. That training that the fulfillment of the being is the delivery of service to humanity. That is very key. The fulfillment of the being is the delivery of service to humanity. Which contradicts with the paradigm perpetuated especially from the west that the fulfillment of the being is how much you exploit life....And it is my submission that by allowing those who make history to write it and read it, that is, let the African women tell you who they are, and why they are. Because it is what they do. And let them substantiate what they do. And listen to them, because they have a way forward and they have a vision about life.

Here Wahu not only defined the kind of leader needed – one who finds fulfillment in serving humanity, but also connected this to her heritage, arguing that she learnt it from her mother and grandmother. And, this orientation towards serving others was so important that she emphasized it by repeating twice in this quote, and saying it again and again during the individual interview as well as the focus group. She was of the conviction that finding fulfillment in serving humanity is a paradigm shift away from western models, and a return to traditional cultural models of leading to serve. She demonstrated this radical servant leadership most eloquently through her critique of social structures, especially those emanating from patriarchy.
Deconstructing Patriarchy

Wahu perceived the need to deconstruct social structures, including patriarchy’s constructions of gender, arguing that only in this kind of critical exercise would scholars and practitioners alike be able to reconstruct a just society. She explained her stand by going back to Kenya’s freedom struggle history, showing that those in power, the colonial and the post-colonial have perfected the art of distorting history to leave out those who contributed the most:

So for my appreciation of the question of gender, its to understand that those who do not create but control, that’s a contradiction. Those who do not create but control have perfected mechanisms of keeping off those who create, because there would be a contradiction. And our Mau Mau history is classic of what has happened, and that’s what inspires me a lot. Because you do see, when we came to independence, the freedom fighters, all the Mau Mau are not anywhere. And for the last forty years there has been a deliberate effort to erase that part of our history. And this year, it was very ironic to see the Kenya national human rights commission, awarding Michuki who has very unpopular participation in Mau Mau medal for being a good fighter. e was given an award together with the widow of Kimathi. So do you see? Can you see? They are in the government. I am just validating what I was saying, those who control. You can see Michuki who has a very bad record in Mau Mau.

Faith: I thought he was a home guard?

He was, not that you thought. He was. He was an outrageous home guard. Even has a nickname of Kimendero, the one who crushes. So can you see the irony of the Kenya National Human Rights Commission in the so-called second liberation victory of Kenya having Michuki and the widow of Kimathi being awarded the same award? Shamelessly, that is what I am trying to say. They shamelessly distort or erase, try to erase, and where they cannot they deconstruct it differently for their own expediency… That is what we need to deconstruct and put on hold to show how the essences of those who really sustain life are important. And with this redefinition and reconstruction of the world, it is so clear, the women, we are the people with skills to reconstruct. The men just destroy, because theirs is to make profit or to expedience the paradigm that just makes profit.

Wahu argued for the need for those who lead for social justice to deconstruct these arrangements, to understand and deconstruct such arrangements in order to lead from truth. In this quote, she eloquently illustrated what she called ‘rule by domination’ or rulership, which she
argued is not leadership, but rather rule by iron hand, supported by such structures as silencing
the real freedom fighters and awarding colonial sympathizers. The widow of Field Marshall
Dedan Kimathi, the freedom fighter who was hanged by colonial powers in the mid fifties, being
awarded the same human rights award as a colonial supporter is the height of irony. Mr. Michuki
is the minister for security in the current government of Kenya, while Mrs. Kimathi continues to
languish in utter poverty in spite of her family’s obvious sacrifice for Kenya’s freedom. It is an
illustration of the social contradictions that Wahu talked about from the very beginning of my
conversation with her, social contradictions that she began to experience as a child and continues
to experience and observe to date. In this environment, an effective woman leader experiences
being an outsider/within in her own culture, in organizations, and in the nation at large. Wahu’s
story illustrated this experience, because even though she is a Kenyan African woman, her values
are at odds with those normalized by the current dispensation of leaders in politics, business and
civic society. She espoused and aptly illustrated her values of serving humanity in
contradistinction to the norms of exploiting humanity. She is determined to see change, to fight
for it with all the tools at her disposal, cultural tools that she has learned from her mother,
grandmother, and the many women in Kenya’s freedom struggle, as well as local grassroots
women:

It’s what the African woman creatively and innovatively has been able to come up with
options and alternatives of gender harmonious relationships, not provoking the ego of the
man, but letting him just remain there doing nothing, but her doing everything with her
family and her obligations as a woman and doing them with no inadequacy at every level,
be it the very poor in the slums, be it the peasants, be it the working class with some
education, be it even the PhDs. They are confronted with these issues and those who have
not been able to come up with that creative solutions have become the victims of the
dislocation and the breakdown of African society. And what is not documented and what
is not said is that strength and that new way of creating new frameworks that holds the
society cohesive and which resolves conflicts that happen, and which provides out of no
resources, and which creates from nothing, and which so to speak, has given the African
capacity to live and not to die as it is already prescribed by the paradigm.
Here then, Wahu has learnt from her forbearers creative problem solving, innovative survival mechanisms and alternative gender relationships that she utilizes in her own life and leadership as a tempered radical – a woman intent on changing her society, her nation, her organization from within. In fact she is so intent on social transformation that she is not afraid to campaign in local, national and global forums. In 2005 alone, she campaigned for debt relief in Glen Egles, Scotland by walking with others in front of the resort with placards that had the faces of the 8 leaders and the message to end poverty and cancel debts; gave speeches in the White Band campaign against poverty in London; and gave the keynote address to the United Nations summit in New York alongside President Clinton. In these forums, Wahu urged powerful western nations to practice justice, especially economic justice by reducing the glaring inequalities. Her speeches are eloquent, if a little blunt, in stating the difficulties that Africa faces and the possibilities inherent in African grassroots actions and powerful Western nations relationships with the continent. In speeches to a gathering of world leaders in St. Paul’s Cathedral, London in July preceding the G8 Summit, and the 58th Annual UN summit held in September 2005, she defined her position as an African woman to whom statistics bear the faces of real people:

In our pursuit for global justice and creating a better world that will uphold our heritage, we have come a long way. I stand before you today as an African women. Somebody who experiences on a daily basis the pain and indignity of hunger, disease and illiteracy. For one who works at the grassroots level, it is a rare honor for me to be even given such an opportunity and I than the organizers and all of you for this…when I see *Live 8* and *Make Poverty History* talking about 30,000 people dying daily, for me this is not a statistic. The images that go through my mind when I see these numbers are the faces and names of real people, my family, my neighbors, my friends, my community.
Beyond her identification with the social and economic problems that plague the continent, Wahu is also able to recognize the agency of Africans, especially women in pursuit of their own emancipation. In the same speech referenced above, and in the many quotes already given about the resourcefulness of Africa’s women, Wahu illustrated this self-determination of African women:

But today I want to bring to you the other Africa, the one that does not appear much on TV screens. The Africa that is waging a determined struggle against poverty. As nations and as a continent. The Africa union and the new African parliament, led by a woman, is a symbol of this new Africa. However, the real transformation that is taking place is at the level of the individual citizens of Africa. The people of Africa are increasingly refusing to accept a life of bondage, poverty and injustice. And our message to our governments in Africa is loud and clear – no more excuses… we will not tolerate corruption and inefficiency from our leaders anymore.

In the same meeting, Wahu connected the struggles in Africa to those of Katrina victims in the US, showing the global nature of injustice and scarcity. For Wahu, even as local people in either context struggle for their self-emancipation, there is also a global call for nations and leaders to find solutions for local-yet-global problems:

2005 has been a monumental year. We have seen bold and broad maneuvers and engagement to address the critical issue of global poverty and inequality. An inequality whose responses and backlash has been and continues to be visited on usdaily… of course inequality is not only between nations but within nations. As Africans, we express our deepest solidarity and condolences with the people of this country affected by hurricane Katrina, this reality has become loud and clear… as much as the dominant discourse on poverty is developing world centric and sub Saharan Africa specific, the so-called developing world too has its stake. a big stake for that matter. Please listen to your own millions of citizens who are asking you to take action against poverty. Don’t tell us you don’t have enough money to meet your aid commitments and cancel debts of all poor countries. You found a lot of money overnight for the war on Iraq and canceling Iraq’s debts.

These quotes from her speeches at the UN in New York and St. Paul’s Cathedral in London illustrates how well versed Wahu is in both local realities and global situations of social
and economic injustice. She is both a local, grassroots activist as well as an international activist as she attempts to change not only her local situation, but the global poverty and inequalities too.

To the G8 leaders, Wahu had this to say as a challenge:

And can we have some honesty please? We no more allow African governments to pretend there is good governance when there isn’t. We don’t want the G8 leaders to exaggerate their announcements on Friday and then to break their exaggerated promises. Let’s stop playing with words which we may not realize are in fact playing with the lives of our African people. We need aid that is truly additional new money. We need debt relief that is not based on more harmful conditionalities. We need this now, not after 10 years. And let us not forget the 8th Millennium Goal was not just about aid and debt, but crucially about trade. We are all a people of God, created in God’s image to live and manifest God in our lives. Our god is not a god of want and fear and indignity. Mr. Secretary General, as you meet the G8 leaders, please personally tell them on our behalf: Let God’s people go from bondage to freedom; freedom from want, freedom from fear, and freedom from indignity. G8 leaders: we want to see your sense of justice, your courage and your humanity.

To say Wahu is courageous is an understatement, yet it is hard to find a more fighting descriptor for one so imbued with boldness in agitating for social and economic justice. In the speech above, she bluntly, publicly, and pointedly challenged the UN secretary general to pass on African women’s demands for freedom from bondage, want, indignity and fear. No wonder the secretary general invited her to give the keynote address at the UN in September, with the caveat that she be as honest there as she was at the London meeting. She talked about this at the focus group which was held a few days before she traveled to New York:

Leadership in Africa does not lead Africans, but it is co-opted to deliver Africa for another expediency which is not African. And, if you take to the time period since after the second world war, the paradigm we are living in which is being celebrated this year by the UN in its sixtieth birthday I would say, I want to announce here and celebrate my argument. Because two days ago I just received an invitation and I am supposed to be a keynote speaker in opening that assembly together with former president of the US Bill Clinton. So how can you explain Wahu Kaara and Bill Clinton on one platform? To make a candid position to set the process of that discussion within the civil society or the civil commons if I may put it so, which is a group that the UN can no longer ignore? It just eh summarizes and confirms my argument because I am a symbol of the African woman, I am a symbol of that role that we have never absconded as African women from our grandmothers to our mothers, to me and to you our daughters, because some of you could
afford to be my daughters. This is because in two very important conferences, I have come very clearly, including the process of G8, and that’s where I think they heard me loud and clear, and I have been saying, Africa will not die for Africa anymore. Africa will now live for Africa. And this is because, the African women, I being one of them, we have refused to die for Africa. And we are living for Africa, because we manage budgets lines without a budget, we give health service without medical insurance, we mobilize resources with no capital etc. So, I think that’s the argument, they are very clear, and they have continued to remind me I should come with my candid position.

The quote above illustrates Wahu’s most important arguments in defense of the African woman, and in elaboration of the resiliency of the African woman: that they manage budget lines without a budget, provide health services without medical insurance, mobilize resources without capital – that African women are by and large resourceful in solving social and family problems in spite of their material limitations. As such, African women leaders have the same capacities for utilizing limited resources to solve social problems. In fact, Wahu argued that the same capacities women use in the private arena are the skills required for leadership in the public arena: resourcefulness, creative problem solving, deep concern for the needs of the community, and motivation to serve those needs, ability to see the bigger picture such that the private becomes public, the local global. And all this is motivated and upheld by a deep spiritual spring:

spirituality gives you the capacity to pursue the truth without illusion. I think as you hear me talk, you can get the courage that I have and the commitment that I have and the energy that I have. Its not because of the breakfast that I ate. No! It’s because of the spirit that is inspiring me.

Vision for Leadership

Wahu’s vision for Kenya, Africa and the world involves achieving social and economic justice for the world’s marginalized, beginning with those in her own backyard. As a widow at an early age, she knows first hand the struggles women face in attempting to achieve their professional, social, community and family goals. As a mother and grandmother, she wants a
better future for her grandchildren, a future that includes equal access to education, property rights for women, political rights for women, access to aid facilities without harmful conditionalities for her beloved Kenya, and access to health services for the marginalized and poor. She hopes for a future where Africa’s real economic prowess can be realized when economic injustices pushed upon the continent by unfair trade relations with the powerful western nations are finally reduced; a hope that she shares with all her fellow campaigners in the GCAP. Whereas she continues her busy campaigning and speaking schedule around the globe as well as in local assemblies, her future goal includes seeking to join political leadership. She told me that she eventually wants to run for the post of president of Kenya, but prior to that, she will run for a parliamentary seat in the 2007 general elections.

Resonance

Wahu captivated me during the individual conversation, and held all of us, the young, the middle aged and the old, spellbound during the focus group. I noted in my memos how it was interesting watching the DVD of the focus group, because all the women present kept on making those sounds that suggest their agreement with her point of view, and they were utterly mesmerized by this small but fiery speaker. When she came into the meeting for the focus group, the dynamics altered drastically, from talking about the women’s place in the kitchen, to national and global positioning of women as the answer to 21st century social problems. We could see how she would and did captivate audiences in those global conferences with her ‘candid position’ as she enumerated African women’s agency in their own emancipation, and the global leaders’ role in helping African people to emancipate themselves. If she is the symbol of the new and emerging African woman as leader, then there is hope for that desperate continent indeed. In addition, it was interesting to note how Wahu seamlessly moved between the local and the
global, the private and the public, making important connections and showing how the different spheres interact. Of particular importance is how she explained leadership, service, courage, social and economic justice, and just about everything else that she touched on in terms of spirituality: that the very purpose for engaging in, and the modus operandi in social justice leadership is deeply spiritual. Everything about her life and leadership is imbued with that critical spirituality that engages with social realities and attempts to change the status quo. For her, social justice is the goal of leadership, and;

That’s what I am determined to do. And that will be done without fear or favor. It will be done with courage and determination inspired differently not by the gains that you are going to get. So fulfillment of life which is very spiritual is the basis for all this.

She truly believed in and practiced spirited prophetic leadership, so much so that her final words to me during the individual conversation were to:

Breathe life into academics. That’s the spirit. The spirit is the only one who compels life.

I hope for Kenya’s sake, for Africa’s sake, for the sake of the millions of people living in deprived conditions in global south locations, for the sake of our understanding of what it means to be a truly prophetic and deeply spiritual leader who will live and die for social justice, that Waku Kaara will achieve her goal of running for parliament, and that Wahu Kaara will one day, for a two-term period, be the president of the republic of Kenya. I believe that the world would be enriched by having this 2005 Nobel Peace Prize nominee becoming the next woman president of an African nation, because she might show us all what it means to provide visionary, nurturing and conciliatory leadership.
SECTION THREE: THEMES EMERGE AND CONVERGE

In the previous section, I presented the reader with an introduction into the context in which the sixteen women leaders and my liaison practice their leadership. I also provided eleven snapshots of the participants as an introduction to the reader of who these women leaders are, where they lead, and a short herstory of each one of them. In addition, I provided five in depth portraits that illustrate the multifaceted experiences of the key women leaders, including their early lives, beginnings of leadership, current expressions of leadership, and how their lives illustrate elements of the conceptual framework. In this section, I expound on the three main elements of my conceptual framework by demonstrating how the African women leaders in this study were tempered radicals and servant leaders whose purpose for being is rooted in spirituality. The next three chapters are exhaustive explications of the three elements, and the last chapter will be a reiteration of the interconnections amongst the elements of the conceptual framework, a re-drawing of the conceptual framework diagram, an exploration into my personal journey and learning, and finally, recommendations for further study.

Chapter 10 is an expansion of the tempered radicalism element, breaking it down to the various themes that emerged to support the women’s position as change agents. Chapter 11 is an explication of the concept of servant leadership specific to the African women leaders’ experiences and expressions. Specifically, I look at how they define it, practice it, and preach it as the modus operandi most relevant for their context. In chapter 12, I explore spirituality as a concept by itself as the women leaders express and expounded on it, both from a personal lifestyle and worldview perspective, and as it impacts their leadership, and show how the three produce spirited leadership.
CHAPTER X: TEMPERED RADICALS

Tempered Radicals are people who are living at odds with the majority culture, and who then choose to be proactive about changing the status quo. Not all women leaders in Kenya or Africa can be described as tempered radicals. Ms Wahu Kaara, one of the participants described the situation thus: “when women are co-opted in ruling as men, they are not part of us, there is a disconnect”. The women selected to participate in this study were chosen on account of their ability to lead as women; their refusal to become androcentricized or masculinized and the fact that they have chosen to seek a more just society. What follows is an accounting of how these sixteen women whom we describe as tempered radicals navigate the terrain of social, cultural, gender, religious, age and ethnic identities as these relate to their experiences as leaders. As tempered radicals, these women leaders are invested in the institutions, organizations, and communities that they are a part of, yet they also want to transform them – they want to rock the boat but remain within the same boat (Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Meyerson, 2001). These quotes illustrate the definition of tempered radicalism as expressed by African women leaders in this study:

**Dr. Riria:** If I can avoid a battle, I will avoid it. But if am forced into a battle, I will say, lets get into it. I will fight when I know am correct and am right. I accept, do I have a doubt that I contributed to this war? If I did, very quickly retreat and apologize. But if you want a war with me on something that I know this phone is mine, you will get a war. Most times I win my battles because I will not be a threat to anybody, I will not be malicious to anybody. My wars are straightforward on principle. And they can be very bitter and very long but I will fight them. I have to know that I will win before I enter into battle. If I lose, OK, I quickly realize am wrong and say sorry. I am also very quick to realize that I have lost. If am the one who is wrong am quick to step away. Am also quick to realize that I don’t know how to do this. So my wars are based on, . I know this I can do this.

**Ms Wanyeki:** In terms of qualities, I think first and foremost I don’t think I am a dishonest person. I am honest in terms of if I believe something in terms of what can and should happen, then that is what I will stand up to defend. Certainly I think I do have the
capacity to stand up and defend ideas for myself but also for other people. I think those two things, and the idea of acting, forcing yourself to act on an issue even when you can see there is going to be consequences, that is really important. And once you’ve done so, to be prepared to deal with the consequences. I think that’s very important. I think another thing is, the idea that I, I mean very much in terms of my work in Canada and the sort of theories that inform me and my own beliefs were very much around collectivism, communalism and so on and I think that, those things are not just ideas they are things you have to practice. And you can practice them even in hierarchical situations. This is a hierarchical organization, I found it that way, I can see some value of having it that way, but it doesn’t mean that you don’t then still try and bring in the ideas that you expect to be treated with some dignity and respect so does everyone around you. And how do you enable that to happen. And applies even when organizing collectively with a huge group of people, its difficult because people have all kinds of expectations in any given situation and again you can get very frustrated. You know you think you have opened up space or enabled space to be opened and all you get are these stabbings on the back or misunderstandings or people acting in their self-interest rather than collectivity, but that’s all part of the process. Yeah.

Rev Mbugua: Once I know that something is right, nothing will stop me. Once I read the bible and found that some things were true, I find a fighter spirit within me, and I say I don’t want this to happen to my daughter. I joined and I was asked and happily agreed to be in the constitutional review of our church as to why women are not ordained. And even when we had theologians sit down and say there is no reason biblically why they are not ordained, the church was still dilly dallying. So I went ahead and got ordained in another church. So I have this winner or fighter spirit that we are not going to leave this thing hanging, let’s get to a conclusion. And I think that is what has helped me

These quotes illustrate how the women find themselves different from the norm, or disagreeing with the organizational modus operandi. Yet, they have to be belong and be a participant of the organization, culture or community that they aim to transform. They find themselves struggling to fit in and to fight out those elements of their organizations or community cultures that they do not agree with. Yet whatever they do, it isn’t necessarily for personal gain, rather, it is for the good of the whole, the betterment of the organization or community. Even those battles that start out as personal struggles such as Rev Mbugua’s desire to be ordained became community successes – now mainstream churches ordain women, something they were resistant to doing prior to Rev Mbugua’s pioneering act. Meyerson gave
five ways through which tempered radicals make a difference: resisting quietly and staying true to oneself; turning personal threats into opportunities; broadening the impact through negotiation; leveraging small wins; and, organizing collective action.

Resisting Quietly and Staying True to Oneself

This is the most innocuous form of resistance for individuals who want some change but do not want to be labeled rebels. Forms of resistance may include mentoring and supporting minorities within the organization or in the community, choosing to dress in a way that is culturally relevant, using artifacts and symbols in the office to address one's cultural heritage, and channeling information to other marginal people within the organization. The quote below illustrates this positioning and method of being a tempered radical:

**Faith**: Did you face many challenges connected to being a woman and a leader in your context?

**Prof Nguru**: No, not very many. I found that it was a good thing to be female because there weren’t very many. So if you are seating round a table and you are the only one, you are given the responsibility to do something. And especially coming back with a new Ph.D and you seem to have a lot of time and energy, and then you get chosen to do a lot of things or appointed to do many things. Of course I remember maybe chauvinism of some sort, when you sit round a table; it is taken for granted if there is need for a cup of tea you are the one to get it. I wouldn’t mind getting it, just that it is like taken for granted.

**Ms Gichaga**: It is always a challenge for a woman in leadership. Maybe for men its easier. One, as a lady, you have many roles that are still your roles. And if you don’t make them your roles your roles. I am lucky for now coz the children are all grown up. But they still require their mom… Balancing responsibilities between home, work, and it becomes even more challenging when you have young children and you have a job that requires traveling….And that has been the biggest challenge. And being challenged as to whether you are doing the right thing. Shouldn’t you be at home taking care of your family? But at the same time I also answer myself and tell myself I am better off outside because I also provide because children will appreciate you more if you are able to provide for their needs. Because if you are just there physically, and they are suffering, then it goes down not very well. They wonder why you don’t do what others are doing to
put food on the table. That has been the greatest challenge. I don’t know whether I have any other

Whereas these two women leaders’ challenges revolved around remaining true to themselves as women and as leaders, attempting to juggle careers with family responsibilities, the other women leaders faced overt gender discrimination, and resented the gender stereotyping that resulted in their being expected to serve tea at board meetings. Most refused to accept being domesticated in their professional roles, and needed to act in more drastic ways to assert their rightful position in their organizations. Dr. Esther Mombo illustrates this point:

I remember like one time I was brought flowers to arrange, so I ask them, why should I arrange them? They said because I am a woman. And I ask, so and so, did he arrange flowers? Why should I arrange flowers? I will do flowers if I want to, but not because it’s an expectation.

Turning Personal Threats into Opportunities

Meyerson’s (2001) second method on the continuum of tempered radicalism is turning personal threats into opportunities for organizational learning. Unlike Prof Nguru and Ms Gichaga, other participants found it necessary to be a little more radical rather than tempered, to varying degrees, depending on the context and situation at hand. There was more need to challenge the status quo, beginning with turning personal threats into learning and action opportunities for themselves and those around them. The quotes below illustrate how these women leaders transformed a personal threat into an opportunity:

Ms Wainaina: I wanted something I can do everyday. And, so I decided to come up with a personal platform and I sat down with it and I went along the platform that had been developed in Beijing and I picked up things I could personally do everyday. When I got into a matatu (public transport vehicle), or going to church or going to the market, what are some things I could do on my own without donor funding or institutions. But soon the opportunity actually presented itself coz Beijing got very bad press here. And you know people believed a lot of the things they heard. And Beijing also created a lot of fear on the part of the men. So, what happened, I found that early in the period after Beijing, you
see at the church and from the pulpit the minister would start talking about Beijing and without knowing enough about it would start say all manner of ridiculous things. That gave me my opportunity, I would just wait outside the church, and I would say, by the way can I talk to you for a moment. You talked about Beijing. Have you ever seen the Beijing platform for action? of course thy didn’t even know there was such a thing as a platform. Then, I would say you know, as a servant of the living God, you are supposed to use the pulpit to speak things that are truthful, things that will help, things that will enrich peoples lives. And one of the responsibilities you have is to never ever speak about things you don’t know about. So I would suggest that before you speak about Beijing again, you look at the platform for action. But for a start I can tell you, I was the leader of the women’s NGOs to Beijing, so if you have any issues, talk to me. And I can also tell you that as a Christian woman there isn’t anything that I cannot stand for, and that will not stand by. So let us understand what it is we are talking about. You read the platform for action you will realize that you are wrong. Then I did it quite often and realized that here was an opportunity.

**Ms Nangurai:** I was in this board for Olkejuado secondary and I get to the meeting, and they are discussing removing the girls from the school to improve the performance of the school. So they are making these decisions and I ask what the background is and how we got here. And the chairman of the board said, ‘you are just a woman. Decision has already been made’... So when I ask what the background is and how they reached here, he said, ‘do you know you have no right to speak here?’ And I said, actually I do, I am a member of the board, and we are not in a manyatta, (traditional Maasai homestead) and I need to talk. And he started cussing at me in kimaasai, ‘she has no manners’. Do you know that night I could not sleep because it was so hurtful. Because there were only two of us women at that board and our opinion was neither sought nor heard. And the DEO (district education officer) was asking me, ‘how do you do it?’ I was telling him I have no godfather, and it became now a quarrel. And the board chairman is saying, ‘I think we can have lunch’. And he kept saying, ‘I think you should go home’. And I kept on saying I am not going to go home, I will stay right here. The only thing I won’t do, I won’t eat. I always remember that and feel sad. Later I went home, the matter was reported to my husband, and I had to go home. And I told him I am not apologizing, you go and apologize because I won’t. And apologize for yourself not for me. And it really brought hustle at home.

**Ms Wahu:** The issue of saying we give women education and empowerment, I think when I came here, and the discussion that was going on was how you arm yourself. Confidence is not bought from a shop or given to you. You have to acquire it, like now these discussions that we are having. ...And these are the battles, when you win it, you win for many other women. Because those men have many other boards, but you only belong to that one. So deal with that board. I was a headmistress of a school in Muranga. There were these old men who were founder members of that school. One was an ex senior chief. Feared and revered. He had ideas on how the school should run. So there was that conflict like this one you are describing, when you are the woman in a board in
which you are not supposed to be there. How to behave. Here is a young woman, as head
of school you are coming as a young woman, and this man has such power. So what he
would do is first of all to give you a lot of problems when it comes to signing of checks.
So as a headmistress you take a check to be signed and he refuses. You become so
frustrated and you start quarrelling with him. The next day you are transferred. So in one
year and a half, they had about five heads of school, the school could not run. So they
took me there as a trial. (laughter). ... of I went, vibrant, I have an idea of what I want to
do with the school, and am not a grasshopper and I tell people I will never be a
grasshopper, and there are no giants. So I gave the check to be signed, as usual he
refused. So I wrote an official letter, ‘I am advising you to call an executive board
meeting to enable me be transferred from the school with immediate effect’. So I gave the
letter. He read, and now he didn’t know what to do because I had given tentative dates for
me to be transferred. So he sent message for me to go. And nobody ever entered his
house. I entered his house, I wasn’t going to talk outside. I didn’t know there was a
tradition that nobody enters the house. So when I went and now he wants to speak to me
outside, and I said, \textit{ndirona ta itari mugeni wa guku ii, riria urienda twarie ni urinjita,}
(which means) I see perhaps you are not ready for me, when you are ready, call me; so he
now took me inside the house and we talked. And I told him, I appreciate that you are a
founder member, you are senior, but you cannot be the head of the school. I am young
and a woman for that matter, but I head the school. I am the face of the school, without
me there is no school. So it is for you to appreciate the technical skills that I bring.
Because me I go from school a to school z all over the country, you are only a board
member here. Do you know what that old man told me, \textit{haiya, na nyina wa kiama wi
mathamaki}, (which means) you are a leader...I am just trying to bring this up to say, we
must liberate this ruler ship from the besieging way of not serving humanity. Knowing
when do you have the strength, when can you hit, and who do you need to bring on
board? Because my predecessors the problem they had was refusing to acknowledge and
respect the role of this old man and make him appreciate their role which he had a
handicap just as we are saying, we need a forum to bring in kina Njoki could be they
don’t know what they are doing. So, you don’t know when you are your brother’s keeper.
And the strength of women is when we are our brother’s keeper because we are very
good in that.

As Meyerson (2001) observed, sometimes action as a starting point can trigger a wide
range of outcomes and further actions. The first rather expansive quote aptly illustrates how Ms
Wainaina utilized an irritating and otherwise threatening situation as an opportunity to educate
her priest on the Beijing Platform for Action, to help the man understand that he was
misinformed and was miseducating his congregation. Ms Wainaina took this action further, not
only did she talk with individual men such as this priest and any other men who dared to speak
ill of Beijing in her presence, but she also found another avenue to utilize her vast experience in
gender and development work. She started working as a consultant to newly formed men’s
groups such as church men’s fellowships on gender issues. She turned a threat into an
opportunity and expanded it to a wider social change activism project.

Sometimes an action is so offensive that it demands a response, but that response must be tempered to achieve some sort of result. Ms Nangurai quote above described one such situation that was particularly offensive to her as a woman and she decided to face head on by responding where she was expected to sit quietly and let others lord it over her. Whereas Ms. Nangurai could have kept quiet seeing as a decision had already been made, she chose to confront the issue head on and demand answers. This did not change the situation; the girls were still removed from the school. But she had made her opinion heard albeit by men who had no regard for a woman’s opinion. This event became a turning point, a defining moment in the life of Ms. Nangurai because from here, she went on to become an activist involved in providing a safe space for girls to acquire education in her Maasai community. The Maasai are a people group in Kenya who due to their nomadic lifestyle and high regard for their animals has no regard for women except as chattels for their economic benefit exchangeable for animals or cash.

Similarly, Ms Wahu Kaara used a personal threat, that of the elderly board member who was attempting to frustrate her efforts, to a learning opportunity for herself, the board, and all other school principals who came after her – by teaching them to acknowledge each others potential and authority, and learn to work together rather than against each other.

Broadening the Impact through Negotiation

To broaden impact through negotiation necessitates courage to step out and act or speak up against injustice. Meyerson (2001) felt that it was imperative to proactively transform problems and reframe meaning, to use negotiation strategies to help transform issues and open
avenues for constructive action. For these women leaders, broadening impact is a prerequisite to achieving their stated goal for being leaders in the first place: social justice for various marginalized populations. Negotiation is an important strategic tactic in achieving progress towards social justice, and it is a strategy many of the participants constantly referred to as they described their leadership communication strategies. According to Meyerson, “to think in terms of negotiation is to think in terms of competing interests, differing positions and concerns, distinct sources of influence, and alternative framing of issues. Negotiating requires discipline and action: people must participate in shaping how problems unfold” (p. 79). The following quotes illustrate how these women leaders articulate their understanding of broadening impact through negotiation:

**Ms Wainaina:** Women’s leadership is the most political work. First of all we are fighting for rights. We are fighting for something somebody else has. So we have to fight them, persuade them. Trick them. Whatever it is it’s with somebody else. So it is so political. You need to be very confident to just be able to continue and to say you know yes, I understand what you are saying, but… you know eh, and to be able to keep your head and not to get angry.

**Mrs. Likimani:** When I was young, we had emergency. People fighting the colonialists. The Mau Mau, the forest fighters. You read so many books. You never see the name of a woman who fought. Have you ever read any? If you have pass it on to me and I will return your money. (Laughter). But there was a time, in central province, there were no grown up men. There was no grown up man, free. You are either in the forest fighting or in detention, or you read shot dead. So others run away and go hide in Sudan, in Ethiopia, everywhere. There was only a handful, who were also fighting not with Africans but as home guards. So the woman and her children were left alone in the central province, alone with their children. I am still following what you say, maybe you will think about it when you talk to these people. what happened is, who was feeding those people in the forest and when they came out of the forest they would be shot? It’s the women who used their heads. One was my working for me later. She told me, “I used to fill bullets”, this is a bare foot woman, “in my market basket. Then I would put maize floor or beans and carry it. I would meet these armed forces, and I would say, habari watoto” (hallo young people). And they would say habari (hallo) mama, because they don’t know she is the one transporting bullets. And she will go and will take the stuff to the safe place they had
agreed with the forest fighters. Without that bare footed woman who has never been in a classroom, they would not have survived.

**Ms Wahu:** I was saying in the university I was in student politics and as a teacher I was determined to produce girls and boys who would really be critical and creative. And I am happy that when I meet them, they actually confirm that. Actually yesterday I met one on the street and said, I was your student. And she started telling me exactly what I am telling you. So, that has been my contribution and also my children, if you came to my house, you would wander, we sleep three am four am as we have these debates. At the national level I also have taken a very clear position as to what I manifest as a Kenyan. I have been at the forefront to engage for political female rights in this country and that’s how I lost my teaching job during the so-called crack down for Mwakenya (group that critiqued the Kenyan government in the mid eighties whom the government hunted down and detained, jailed or killed in freak accidents). I was a delegate at the National Constitutional meeting at Bomas and I took a clear position to defend the people driven constitution. Subsequently Katiba (constitution) Watch and even now I still prescribe to a people-driven constitution. Globally I have been a key debt campaigner through a platform here in the country called Kenya Debt Relief Network, and in total the question of economic justice. And that’s how I perhaps modestly call myself global social and economic justice activist. Currently I am very instrumental in the process of the World Social Forum through the African Social Forum, Kenya social forum and our local Huruma Social Forum. We are going to host the World Social Forum in 2007.

Ms Wainaina recognized the fact that when it comes to leadership for social justice, a woman has to learn to persuade to get the rights that women have been denied back from those holding those rights. The point is not to get angry, but rather to harness the energy of righteous indignation towards constructive action. The quote by Mrs. Likimani illustrates how women who may not have been considered leaders were in fact adept at leading and negotiating for the sake of achieving a particular emancipatory goal. Mrs. Likimani was attempting to expand the notion of leadership by utilizing this illustrative anecdote about women negotiating the terrain of colonial occupation by utilizing their negotiating skills and carrying weapons of war to the fighters. This kind of negotiation is moderated by the contextual realities of the need for emancipation. Mrs. Likimani as a prolific writer whose work revolves around ‘putting women back into history, especially the history of Kenya’s emancipation from colonial rule’ was able to
draw examples from the lives of such rural, illiterate, bare foot, grassroots leaders whose efforts went a long way in shaping Kenya’s history, even though they have been left out of history books. Ms Wahu’s description of her role in fighting for economic, political and social justice issues demonstrates how she engages in broadening action, beginning with the family front, moving to community, national and finally global forums in pursuit of justice goals. Her near detention by the Kenya government resulted in early retirement from teaching, but opened up the opportunity for her to extend her work beyond the high school classroom and local communities to national and global forums. This also illustrates turning personal threat (near detention) into opportunities for herself and the many Kenyans, Africans and other people that she has interacted with in the Social Forums and Debt Campaigning networks.

**Leveraging Small Wins**

Small wins are those seemingly minute projects that result in concrete, measurable, and visible progress in the process of organizational transformation (Meyerson, 2001). Sometimes the small win becomes impetus for further and broader action down the line.

**Ms Nangurai:** For three years I tried to find out why the girls were not performing well. I noticed that girls were dropping out a lot. I was younger then and I really feared the culture of our people so I did nothing about it. So up to 1986 I did nothing, but in that year, one of our girls when home and she was going to be married off. but she said no. she wrote a letter to the DC asking us to find a way of rescuing her. so the DC came and I told him I was afraid I couldn’t do it, it’s something I would like to do but I can’t do it. So the DC went to the fathers place. lucky for her she had not had contact with her husband. Because traditionally we stay for five days before we move to the husbands. Lucky for her she was rescued and she came back here. she is one person who really inspires me. Because during the holidays she said I cannot go home because they will marry me off. I did not know what to do with her but after talking with my family they agreed to house her. so, then I was thinking how can I do this, how can I rescue a girl. When we succeeded with charity now I thought to myself that no other girls will be given away if we can help it.

**Ms Ole Marima:** I retired from world vision in 1992, so I have been on my own since then. I have been a farmer, I have gone while at home I have gone back to do awakening
of my people both in politics and development and community programs. I have involved women a lot and I started to sell to them the idea of micro-enterprise, even in farming, even in small entrepreneurship. So I have gone back home and said, I have come, what I am supposed to do here. I said Lord, help me to appreciate what you have given me. And he has given me land, sufficient to do, I went into wheat farming. And, even cattle trade. So I have involved the very local women to say can you harvest? I tell them to go into goat industry. Go into their small shambas and we started to have kitchen gardens. We started now on nutrition and personal cleanliness. They have learnt to now wash. They are so smart when they have any ceremony, you just appreciate, very beautiful people, very clean people, and very decorated. So I have been with those women, which was very easy because I was giving them knowledge, which they appreciate, because I believe in lifting them up. That was not so much of a challenge because the only thing I was encountering was the illiteracy rates. They could not read and balance their books but they are very good upstairs, actually somebody can track her own money.

Ms Nangurai took her small win with Charity to begin the rescue mission; Ms Ole Marima began with very small lessons on personal hygiene and kitchen gardens. The two also illustrated the insider/outsider experience of tempered radicals who are involved in cultural transformation of their own communities, as educated and economically advanced Maasai women who work to advance the status of their illiterate womenfolk.

Organizing Collective Action

In discussing how tempered radicals organize collective action, Meyerson (2001) was of the opinion that tempered radicals acted in the same way as revealed in the research on social movements. In this regard, three pre-conditions are necessary before collective action can be achieved: a. the presence of immediate political opportunities or threats; b. available structures for members to organize themselves into a collective; and c. the framing of collective identity, opportunities, and threats (p. 124). All these pre-conditions exist in the African context, in what Dr Abuom called ‘the collective mass of the oppressed’. The quotes below illustrate the phenomena:

Ms Likimani: But there was a time, in central province, there were no grown up men. There was no grown up man, free. You are either in the forest fighting or in detention, or
you read shot dead. So others run away and go hide in Sudan, in Ethiopia, everywhere. There was only a handful, who were also fighting not with Africans but as home guards. So the woman and her children were left alone in the central province, alone with their children. I am still following what you say, maybe you will think about it when you talk to these people. What happened is, who was feeding those people in the forest and when they came out of the forest they would be shot? It’s the women who used their heads. The woman would be caught up in communal forced labor from seven thirty in the morning to four thirty; by the time she walked back to her hut it is dark. And mzungu were asking, these maize and beans, when were they planted? Because these women who planted the gardens spent all day at communal forced labor making a road for the armed forces to drive on to get to the forest to kill your brothers, are you with me? There is no road, there were no bridges, its women who were making them because men were not there. And, they would still see beans growing, potatoes growing, when were they planted? Because they have been at work from seven thirty until four thirty. When did they do it? Its because they would go and organize, I don’t have this, do you have firewood? The one would give wood, the other will give some water, and the other will have collected some food from the garden and dug around a few rows of potatoes. That’s what an African woman will do.

Ms Ole Marima: So I am called Honorable Marima, Women’s shadow parliament, Nairobi North. But that’s the kind of thing we have decided to be the alternative parliament. When we get empowered and all this, these are the people who are the voice of reason. That’s what we have decided to call ourselves, voice of reason. When the parliamentarians are just giving themselves so much money per month …

Dr. Mombo: Another interesting thing is that I realized that in order to make sure the women understand, I need the support of women because it’s an isolated environment, I just have to have the support of women. So I have groups of women, I tell them, I don’t mind, you are socialized in a certain way. But if you believe that I am harsh, then you are harsh. This is the way we have been socialized. And something else, when I do workshops, like I bring together a hundred women and we talk about this socialization. I ask them, why do you think you are a bad boss as a manager and not the man? Why do you have to serve tea to the males, and the former academic dean did not serve anybody tea?

Ms Wahu: The world social forum is involved in looking for another world, build a just world because in the current world everybody is quite unjust. And, the social forum tries to critique the liberal paradigm as it exists and tries to engage in alternatives that people creatively are coming up with, like you are trying to argue from your observation here, what the ordinary people do is never documented. And the social forum is keen in trying to build synergy of the emerging alternatives for sustenance of life. Because the current paradigm its clear is serving the interest of finance capital only for profit, and at the level we are in, it is actually a great danger to life sustenance. So the World Social Forum
emerged as a platform to begin to build that synergy and it was motivated by wanting to critique what happens every beginning of year at the World Economic Forum in Switzerland to design and to decide and to evaluate on how they are going to continue perfecting the current paradigm in terms of the economic models that serve the neo-liberal agenda that facilitates finance capital for profit. So, that is the process and the key thing is that people are agreeable that another world is possible.

Ms Wahu: Reverend, we build alliances. We build alliances, that’s why you are an Anglican, that’s why I am a Presbyterian. That’s why every other person is whatever, because we prescribe certain things in the way you are manifesting your life. But there comes time when you can build alliances, or you can bond, or you can work together. For the benefit of this scholar, for the benefit of this scholar and I want it to be on record, we are deconstructing society.

Rev: Let me tell you, why are we deconstructing society?
Wahu: because it is wrong. There is something that is wrong.
Rev: What is wrong?
Wahu: our relationships. With each other and with our lives. And this is because of the model, because of the model that we live in.
Rev: yes it is … (laughter). So, what we are saying is, that even as we talk, there is need to take action and to do something else. There is need to build. Because dialogue will work. Because we are saying that deconstruction without relationship will not work. And therefore it is important for us to have dialogue, and from the dialogue, we are going to be able to deconstruct that which will be helpful to all of us. And that’s why I am saying, it is good to bring all the people on board, even men. Bring people on board. Let people get together. The society is not for women or for men, the society is for all of us. And because it is collective responsibility, let’s go back to the drawing board and ask ourselves, how can we have a better world. How can we make this world a better place. So for me I support what you are saying.

The quotes demonstrate how women collectivize to solve problems, something they have done since colonial times. According to the historians in the group, Wahu, Muthoni Likimani and Dr Abuom, women in Central Province of Kenya began collectivizing long before colonial invasion. As an agricultural community, land was not held by individuals but rather by the entire village or clan. As such, all members of the clan would gather to do all major farming activities together, sowing, weeding, harvesting. Men did the harvesting and the heavy tilling, women did the sowing and weeding. As such, when women utilized collectives to solve the emergent problems of food, water, firewood and herding of animals during the colonial-imposed
emergency period, they were utilizing a practice that was held in their cultural make up. As the conversation between Rev and Wahu demonstrates, these women believe in building alliances across differences in order to construct a new just society.

In addition to these five methods of actualizing tempered radicalism that Meyerson (2001) conceptualized, African women leaders utilize several other tools at their disposal in negotiating their social identity as African, women, leaders, and members of a particular ethnic community, in a specific nation, under the current global capitalist dispensation.

Intercultural Boundary Spanning

The women leaders who participated in this study are engaged in leadership for social justice that requires crossing back and forth between various frontiers. Whereas many of those they advocate for are illiterate, poor, or marginalized, these women leaders are the few in their communities who have attained education and exposure through regional and international travel. As such, they bridge gaps between young people and older generations in dealing with cultural malpractices, poor marginalized populations and their need for legal literacy, and women in need of economic emancipation. The quotes below illustrate how these women leaders span inter-cultural boundaries to bridge existing gaps with necessary and sometimes novel knowledge:

Ms Ole Marima: I decided to handle another very difficult area. First of all when I was in World Vision, I was able to register an all women development organization called RETO organization. Reto in Maasai land is help, it’s like self-help. I brought in the aspect of self-sustenance. While still at Reto, we are still addressing the same issues of health, education, and actually we made education the key thing. That’s what I was visualizing, that if I bring the level of education to these people, they will be able to do a lot for themselves. From that, when I already did that with Reto, I was already accepted through Maasai land by everybody, because even while I was in world vision I managed to make the Reto women go back home. And they made money and materials, especially water; I made water the key thing, so we are so easily accepted because we came to address the issues that were affecting them. So now, the second part of my life, I decided just to say, now I have given them this, I have given them that. Now there is another big issue that we need to deal with, that is FGM. It’s a sensitive issue. It takes mad people to talk about it. Because first of all it’s a taboo. You never even mention it. When you dare to talk
about it, they look at you. They are either thinking you abuse them, or they think you are manner less, that kind of thing. But I find that we have already managed to change a few. And even if we don’t change them completely, we have given them the opportunity to come to be taught their basic rights. Because we believe FGM is a human rights violation, I come from that perspective, that angle. And then, as we handle it as a human rights violation, then we look at the health issues related to that. You can bleed to death, you can have infections, you can have clots, everything. So now we are working on their psychology, of not having to resist but see the negative part of it. We have a rescue center in Kajiado, its called Tasaru Rescue girl’s center. I do it with a person that actually got the project by the name Agnes Pareiyo.

Ms Nangurai: I have remembered what I wanted to tell you about HIV. in the course of talking to the ladies. you know we are very close so sometimes I bring them to my house and we watch videos together. I was talking to a group of them. I talked to them about aids in urban centers. but they were laughing that they are safe, they don’t go to urban centers. Forgetting that their men go to sell cattle in the urban centers and when their pockets are full and there are the women waiting for those heavy pockets. Women call them skirt wearers. Because them they wear shukas. and the husband will come home and say I slept with a skirt wearer. One lady was telling me that I even tried to buy a skirt to see whether he would be interested in me. She discovered it wasn’t the skirt he was going for. So these women think that because they don’t go to urban centers, they won’t get AIDS. These urban centers are growing very fast and aids there is an epidemic. So to the women they thought its when they go out with other men. They didn’t realize their husbands will bring the disease home.

Ms Thongori: I came face to face with poverty. It occurred to me how legal illiteracy had affected people’s lives. Even how gifted we were, we had all this knowledge in our heads, and it didn’t cost anything to give it to others. But that knowledge given to someone who really needed it helped a lot. I remember driving to Embu and meeting a client waiting outside the court, she started jumping with excitement. Having a competent lawyer was more than she could imagine. Having a lawyer from Nairobi was like a miracle. So you can imagine even the way it affected her confidence and everything. Now children who almost couldn’t go to school could go back to school. I could hardly believe I was the same person who used to practice commercial law. I was a changed person.

That’s been me. I stayed at FIDA for five years but more importantly I used that platform to change people’s lives to teach people through the newspapers, talking to them in churches, all sorts of places. The greatest thing also was receiving feedback, getting feedback from women who had read about what I had written and had used the law to better themselves. But also men and you know men are more likely to write back to you than women because they have the tools. One of the people that I remember most was one who wrote ‘that I had this situation and I didn’t know what to do with it but now I know what to do’. If a man is able to move on then am happy…Two weeks ago I was at
the market buying tomatoes and stuff on a Saturday morning. And this man comes up to me and says ‘Judy Thongori I have known about you for along time and I have a question I would like to ask you. Do you mind consultation by opportunity?’ That’s what he called it. I said I don’t mind at all. And he said that he had an issue, this issue was about his brother and what have you. And in fifteen minutes we were done. Now the tomato seller also had a question once she learnt that I was a lawyer

Ms Thongori was bridging boundaries by using the media for those who were literate, and giving legal education talks to others in churches and community meetings; utilizing the means available to her to spread the message far and wide to both literate and illiterate populations. Ms Ole Marima and Ms Nangurai fill cultural and knowledge gaps for their nomadic Maasai community, helping women and girls achieve education and economic emancipation for the purpose of developing their community.

Resourcefulness and Creative Problem Solving

In each of the sixteen narratives, the women discussed ways and means they had utilized to solve problems that they encountered on a personal, professional and community level. They also described what they considered to be an African woman trait: that of being resourceful and creative problem solver born out of the poverty and challenges of her experience. In the following quotes, the leaders illustrate their own and other women’s resourcefulness and creative problem solving capabilities utilized to solve family, community and societal problems:

**Ms Wahu:** We are the engines of our own societies. Look at the micro-credit thing emerging from the women’s groups, which is not anything that anybody came to energize, it is the creative, creativity and innovativeness as we look to meet these budget lines without any budget, and people can up with a very viable way of mobilizing resources, out of goodwill, collateral is goodwill. Out of either you come from one community, or your friends, the goodwill you have, you make it collateral, the human goodwill. And we are living for Africa, because we manage budgets lines without a budget, we give health service without medical insurance, we mobilize resources with no capital, etc Poverty is a created scarcity and if it is a created scarcity it can be dealt with and dealing with it in exactly what you have observed our ordinary women doing: Managing economically without any budget, giving their children food without resources, taking care of their sick without health insurances, taking their children to school without
education bursaries and without any assistance. Believing and convincing themselves that together they can do it. So that is the strength that Africa has, that together we can make it.

**Dr. Mombo:** While I have been at this college, my conviction has been that I don’t want to live alone in this high seat, but I want to ensure that many receive theological education. I found about women ten students but now there is about sixty. That has taken raising money for their support. I also have a conviction that we have to take this hold of good women so people who for one reason or another are single mothers who are left out within the church hierarchy, who are never given an opportunity, I have been admitting them for theological education. The church has criticized me for that but for me its ok.

**Rev Mbugua:** I think for me, I feel that necessity is the best teacher. Just that necessity and knowing that this drunkard will never build me a house, he will never educate my children, he will never do this or that. So the issue then is, do I follow him drinking, do I look at my children as they suffer, or what do I do? So for me, necessity has become a great teacher. And even the people, it is true the African women are very resilient. And I guess it is because of their poverty. So necessity, and in a way, poverty and problems have their own blessings in disguise. …

For many of these women leaders, their positions are an opportunity to ‘live for Africa’, to ‘uplift the community’, to achieve social justice rather than merely a place for their own economic uplift. As such, they have to creatively find ways to come up with the resources they need to fund their agendas, to solve their own as well as their communities’ issues. They quietly go about the business of communicating with potential funding sources, donors, supporters who can give them the financial resources they need for their projects.

**Learning To Be Tempered or Radical With Age and Experience**

Meyerson and Scully (1995) theorized that tempered radicalism may look different at each stage of an individuals development, with some becoming more tempered with age, others becoming more radical with age. Many of the participants talked about the mistakes they made in their earlier leadership experiences because they were too bold, too radical, and too independent-
minded to be effective. Here the participants talk about their experiences in learning how to choose their battles wisely; becoming more tempered with age and experience:

**Dr. Mombo:** While in this diocese I initiated the whole dialogue on the ordination of women. Between 1985 and 1995, I spoke about it in every synod. And at first they would chase me and tell me to go away and get a husband. I made a lot of mistakes back then, coz I was young and didn’t know how to play the game. I began politicking coz I realized you had to find ways to gain the men’s trust. By 1990 they had agreed in principle that they would ordain women so it was working. By the time I was leaving to go and study for my Ph.D I knew they would never go back.

**Ms Wainaina:** I found that even in the home, where you have grown up in very different environments and we have children jointly with somebody who doesn’t have your values. I mean someone who can tolerate who you are and the things you stand for, but they do not necessarily go along. Then when you disagree, that becomes a real challenge because either you have to give up your position or you have to defy. And for me, I chose to defy a lot of things and obviously that creates conflicts and over the years, looking back now thirty nearly forty years of that, I can see that perhaps had I been a little bit more better prepared, or better mentored. There are certain things I could have persisted on, and negotiated. Because in the beginning, my thing was independence. I wanted to be independent; I didn’t want ever to ask for this, and so on. But looking back now, we need to grow out of dependence, into independence, but we need to grow to a higher level of inter-dependence. And that is something that I have only now learnt a little bit later in life. It would have been very good had I had that frame of mind. Then when I became independent, I would have started working towards interdependence. What I found is that in my independence, I sort of just said well, I don’t need you. I can get on without you. And that and I think that is something that I, if I were to live my life all over again, I would really negotiate a little bit more to move out of the independence frame faster.

**Rev Mbugua:** One of them is Gods faithfulness and God’s desire for women to rise up. Because I have seen all these openings that he has given us which shows for sure it is his desire for us to rise up and then, another lesson I have learnt is tolerance. Because before I would get very impatient with men and feel like they were being inconsiderate about women. But now I realize that they too are ignorant. They too were brought in the same circumstances like us that women are inferior and men are superior. So this has enabled me to have the patience to even work out sometimes behind the scenes to ensure that men are trained. Coz I realize that there are so many trainings for women but men are not being trained.

Ms Wainaina said she has utilized this lesson in her gender and development work especially when it comes to dealing with more radical feminists, learning to work on joint
agendas even though other issues that radical feminists agitate for are against her personal values. She has learnt to utilize the notion of negotiation that she has learnt as she has become more tempered to put aside her misgivings about certain topics such as abortion and gay unions in order to work at issues they agree on such as domestic violence. She said earlier in her career, she would not have been able to work with such radical feminists.

Leverage Outsider/Within Positionality

Being an outsider/within may look different depending on whether we are talking societal level or institutional level. However, the tactics utilized to survive and thrive are interestingly similar and involve an element of both fitting in and standing out. Sometimes it requires the woman leader to become vocal and to articulate her positioning in spite of opposition from the majority. The following quotes illustrate the various ways these women leaders experience and leverage their outsider/within positionality:

**Dr. Mombo:** I realized that I rubbed shoulders with the hierarchy. I will open my mouth at the meetings. I will interrupt because waiting for my opportunity will not come up. So sometimes I will jump in and say, ‘Mr. chairman this is what I want to say’, and I would say it. Very interesting experiences because this is an institution which is charged with, which is supposed to stand for fairness and justice. Yet there are gender inequities, they are oppressive, its basically an unfair institution. The good things they are doing I support, the things that are bad I critique… The ladies had been told am a feminist so you are shied off. Women don’t want to associate with me so that they are not called feminists too. So if I became assertive I am not motherly, if I become motherly I am not assertive. So both ways you are a loser. So you better do one thing. And remember when I came they said she is just a woman.

**Ms Wahu:** In this boardroom, you have no apology to say you have forgotten me. You have to sort it out first so that never they dare forget you because you are there by right and merit, not as a privilege. And these are the battles, when you win it, you win for many other women. Because those men have many other boards, but you only belong to that one. So deal with that board.

**Dr. Riria:** But let me tell you, there is a price. When you see me here, let me assure you there is a price. And one of the prices you pay is how people view you. So a lot of women
will shy away so that they are not construed a certain way. I am construed as a rebel because I stand for what I believe and I will not let any man mess with me. That I don’t do. Feminine I am, but don’t mistake it to mean I will let anybody walk on me. Now, assertiveness has not been taken very kindly by men. And that is why you see when women assert themselves, and you have heard that if you are a successful woman you are divorced. Most probably it is true, I am divorced. You begin asserting yourself and the men have remained in the 18th century. There are two things as a woman, you either choose to be put down or you choose to go ahead and you pay a price in a society that does not recognize the value of a woman in the economy. That one is no question about it. I do not know, because I, most of the women that I know would like to have a companion but it doesn’t work that way. And you are left asking, what do I do. So you have to make a choice, its not an easy choice to make. And you wish you didn’t have to choose between what you have to do and your natural role. But that has come for every professional woman. And it’s tough for women. You have got to work double hard; you have to be a different person. If you want to remain a woman, for me it’s important to retain my femininity. I don’t want to be taken for a man. I start by telling people by saying I am a mother I am a grandmother, and then on top of this I am this. Because women think that you have to behave like men. I can tell you I am very feminine.

**Ms Wainaina**: In fact, one of the other things about the strengths and you should go back to that, is that as leader, you must be prepared to be different. One thing is really never to be afraid of being different. If you are afraid of being different, you are not going to get far. If you are afraid of being called names, of being called a bad girl, of being used as bad example, you are not going to get anywhere. I am prepared to take all that because in my village now, there are certain things I have done that young girls can do, but what will the villagers say, they have learnt bad manners from Njoki. And me, that’s a sacrifice I am willing to make for the rights of women.

This quote and the previous ones illustrate the fact that for these women, having a position of leadership does not automatically mean that they will be accorded the authority that should accompany those positions. As outsiders/within, they have to find away to belong, to fit in, even as they critique and attempt to alter those institutions and those boards. In winning such battles, Wahu says, ‘when you win it, you win for many other women’. That is, the recognition that every time the outsider/within becomes an acceptable part of the organization, when she earns credibility even as she remains a ‘thorn in the flesh’ of the organization, she opens doors to other women. It is a matter of recognizing the advantages of being an outsider/within and
utilizing that position to achieve social justice goals. As Ms Wainaina recommended, one need not be afraid of being different because it is in that difference that she can institute and drive change.

In order to be successful, these women leaders are not only tempered radicals intent on bringing about social transformation, but also humble servants; they earn credibility by demonstrating to their constituents that the goal of their leadership is to serve them, to help them achieve social justice as the weak, marginalized or impoverished members of society. As such, to be truly effective, these women leaders have to be both tempered radicals and servant leaders.
CHAPTER XI: SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Larry Spears discussed the notion of servant-leadership as a revolutionary concept that operates counter-culturally; “since the time of the industrial revolution, managers have tended to view people as objects; institutions have considered workers as clogs within a machine” (2002, p. 2). However, the African women in this study illustrate the fact that servant-leadership is not counter-cultural in the traditional African context. In fact, they argue that modernity is what has altered the servant-leadership attitudes of the leaders due to the emergence of capitalism and its antecedents of individualism and competition. These women leaders argue that the notions of leadership as gendered male, and the practices that emanate from modern conceptualizations of leadership are alien to their sensibilities as Africans and as women. For them, the concept of serving others is natural, inherent and a sort of cultural genetic makeup – African women serve others, whether these are their immediate family, their communities, their nations as will be demonstrated henceforth. The quotes below illustrate the women’s definition and understanding of the roots of servant-leadership:

**Ms Wahu:** So, I would say, all these questions they are helping us to remind us that, in deed and am glad there is servant leadership, and I don’t want to take servant because of the connotations in how it is used, but fulfillment in serving humanity. Leadership that gives fulfillment in serving humanity. That is our greatest strength…This is what I was trying to bring from my grandmother. It is the heritage that we have, the heritage we have of the preparedness of engaging with life, that heritage, the remnant is still there just like I am trying to tell you I watched in my grandmother and mother. That training that the fulfillment of the being is the delivery of service to humanity. That is very key. The fulfillment of the being is the delivery of service to humanity. Which contradicts with the paradigm perpetuated especially from the West that the fulfillment of the being is how much you exploit life.

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

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

These leaders demonstrated that it is something they had learnt from her grandmother and from her mother, it is something deep within African traditional cultures especially as relates to women – that women were first and foremost service givers and this is how they fulfilled their purpose for being. Ms Wahu was convinced that whereas modernity has washed over these traditional notions of providing service, a remnant can still be found amongst some women leaders, not all, because many have been co-opted into ruling like men;

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

Ms Wahu illustrated that the real, the authentic African women’s leadership that is respected and honored and credible is the one that is service-oriented. In discussing the servant as leader, Greenleaf prophetically observed that;

The signs of the times suggest that, to future historians, the next thirty years will be marked as the period when the dark skinned and the deprived and the alienated of the world effectively asserted their claims to stature, and that they were not led by a privileged elite but by exceptional people from their own kind. (1977, p.34)
The women leaders discussed here are a fulfillment of Greenleaf’s apt prophecy – they are the dark skinned and deprived and alienated who have arisen to serve their kind in their search for social justice. I will illustrate the various ways in which the women articulated servant leadership as their chosen and culturally relevant leadership style.

Empowerment

Greenleaf conceptualized servant leaders as leaders who are committed to the growth of people. Spears (2002) talked about servant leaders as leaders who “believe that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers…deeply committed to the growth of each and every individual…to nurture the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of employees” (p. 7-8). The following quotes illustrate how the African women leaders in this study described their empowerment goals as leaders:

Ms Wahu: So this is the time now we must make the axis of all agents of social transformation to come on how we find fulfillment in serving humanity not in exploiting humanity for your own expediency. And that’s why I am not worried as a woman because they must exit, they must exit and give us way otherwise they will perish because we women we are not going to perish. We shall not perish, not even now when you and I are sitting here inspired by those days and we have capacity to do something. You have the capacity to write as an intellectual, I have a capacity to scream and shout as an activist. So I think its game short for the men, and I just tell them I have no problem with men. I don’t prescribe to that school of thought of feminism where you have one woman beaten, and ten men killed because it is not a matter of vengeance. It’s not a matter of inferiority superiority complex, its not a matter of biological misnomer or descriptions that weaker sex stronger sex. It’s a matter of what can you contribute to humanity, and history is showing this is the moment where women have the greatest opportunity to make their known and not-acknowledged contribution to humanity. And I say this and I can validate but am not an academician to put facts, but I can argue it out. Because the system as it is has already besecheched men as I have said, especially African men, they have been serving the system. And the system has been destructive. So the men have nothing but destructive skills to manage society. The women were excluded out of that because theirs was to be exploited, but there was life to take care off. So they have perfected their constructive skills to manage society. We want constructive skills to manage society. Who has them? Women. It’s an obvious, objective, clear position, even in a team, you don’t allow the best player not to be the flag bearer of the team. So, the 21st century will have to be flag beared by the women.
Dr. Abuom: I was saying that when you look at the continent and in this country in particular, I can see the resilience of the African women in terms of economic survival and ensuring that in spite of all the bartering of the family structure, she holds the unit together. She becomes the pillar. To leave her at the pictorial image of a beast is not telling the whole story. So when I look at women and leadership, I am saying there are traits in women., there are things that by nature the way God created women and the fact of tasks that women have had to manage in the home, the multitask approach, led to inclusion, to negotiation, and to care... The dislocation of the family. Its part of hitting back at women. To be able to turn around this, we have to turn around a leadership that is holistic, that is inclusive of all. That recognizes and upholds everybody.

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

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

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

Healing

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

**Ms Wahu:** The World Social Forum is involved in looking for another world build a just world because in the current world everybody is quite unjust. And, the Social Forum tries to critique the liberal paradigm as it exists and tries to engage in alternatives that people creatively are coming up with, like you are trying to argue from your observation here, what the ordinary people do is never documented. And the Social Forum is keen in trying to build synergy of the emerging alternatives for sustenance of life. Because the current paradigm its clear is serving the interest of finance capital only for profit, and at the level we are in, it is actually a great danger to life sustenance.

**Dr. Abuom:** A leadership that is holistic, that is inclusive of all. That recognizes and upholds everybody. So that if you are to do gender, what we normally call gender map, we have men, women and children, where all the resources are shared between these three categories in a family. The leadership model that looks at everybody as people. And you see for me it has to move, because from this mythology, muthungus (westerners) have even gone as far as to help us develop myths that are now destroying Africans. This one is a mulevi (drunk), that one is a mwizi (thief). Myths that destroy us…I like a writer who says, why don’t you bring what you have, and I bring what I have, so that we are in relationship. Because I don’t have what you have, and you don’t have what I have, so we are brought together so that you partake of mine and I partake of yours. This is a powerful way of thinking about it. Instead of I have a deficit, I have a capacity gap, I need this, I need that, yet there is no way one person can have everything…My worry, and my real wish and prayer that God will give me grace and health to work with these churches on the issues of resolving conflicts. Because these conflicts are fueled by people who when it comes to elections, you flag ethnicity. When it comes to issues, you see them along ethnic lines.

**Ms. Nangurai:** When you see your successes it really encourages you. And I know I have kept saying I will leave. But when you see Charity and others like her, its very encouraging. Like Charity is now an orphan her parents are both dead. But reconciliation had already taken place with her parents. So with her first salary she took her father a
blanket seeking for blessings. Now she is the one who is taking care of her sisters and brothers. So when you see that you get that strength.

Ms. Achieng: We want war stopped. Because the war is killing people who were not involved in the decision. We know that there is a problem, but that problem does not need to mean killing people who are not involved. And those who question who are we, we are not victims, we are actors. That is the story of Sudan women’s voices for peace was formed in 1994 with the background of peace building and advocacy for human women rights. That is our program for women and we, as we said we are actors we are not victims. We want to speak for ourselves. We are not speaking only for women and children; we are speaking for the families here. We are speaking for security at home...I had a very bad accident. So the accident, normally when you work volunteer you are not insured. So positive that many friends from Europe pay in Nairobi hospital. But I believe my healing was based on Gods grace. Just two months I was back to my peace work, nobody could believe it. And the best time also is connected to that accident is trauma counseling. We initiated it here that even if we do this peace sign and justice, we have to develop a healing program. We develop a program called seeds of peace. It’s a counseling program and the healing was that if we don’t promote dialogue and unity among the women’s groups, we will not get far.

In each case, the women articulated how their personal experiences, professional exposure and community needs interacted and led to their practice of healing as reconciliation, conflict resolution, trauma counseling, gender mainstreaming, and peace building.

Stewardship

Servant-leadership, according to Spears (2002) assumes a commitment to serving the needs of others by using the tools at the leader’s disposal. Stewardship implies holding something in trust for another. The following quotes represent how the women described their experiences and thoughts about stewardship:

Ms Wahu: So that is the strength that Africa has, that together we can make it. That spirit of human solidarity, that commitment to not just exist but living, because living is participating and making your life practical and the essence of being. That is the essence that Africa has. In spite of what you want to say. And for me, Africa will decide what becomes of it, because Africa is the only continent and to some extent Asia where you find that the bedrock of the human spirit has not been defiled, that has not been broken, that is determined to see future generations have something to inherit. Not for consumer, but for propagating the purposes of creation and the purposes of continuity of humanity.
Dr. Mombo: I have fostered three sons, I am being asked to consider fostering a girl. Maybe I will. For me, they are my family although sometimes as a single parent you are seen as a monster. I give them an education and a home.

Ms. Likimani: I am a retired broadcaster, a retired teacher. Now I am retired and I just write from my house. My interests are in women and development and it is what I write most about, women because I feel they have been ignored. ...I never forget and everything I see I write. When I was young, we had emergency. People fighting the colonialists. The Mau Mau, the forest fighters. You read so many books. You never see the name of a woman who fought. Have you ever read any? If you have pass it on to me and I will return your money.

Ms. Gichaga: Running a national office is also quite challenging because it tells me you are not here for yourself, you are here for the whole country, for all girls.

Dr. Mombo’s actions in fostering the children are counter-cultural because under African customs, women should get married then have children. Whereas those who already have a husband and children can foster others, those who are unmarried are expected to seek a husband first. It also gives room for misunderstanding because many who may not know that she fostered the children are likely to brand her as a home-wrecker, immoral woman, something she said often happens. But she felt giving the children a home and an education far outweighed societal norms of marriage and family. She felt that whereas she has been able to help her own siblings acquire education, and has provided a home for them, the next move would be to foster other children because she has the means to do so. Ms Muthoni Likimani’s notion of stewardship is to write books for posterity, to ensure that those who come after her will have a chance to learn about some of Kenya’s missing history. For these women, being stewards is as Ms Gichaga articulated; they do what they do for the sake of others.
Building Community

Greenleaf felt that much had been lost through the institutionalization of services that in prior generations were provided through local communities. As such, he conceptualized servant-leaders as people who helped to build community within the institutions that they led.

Community has not yet been lost in most African contexts, even though with the advent of urbanization and globalization, it is an endangered concept. African women leaders work to strengthen existing communities, as well as re-create a sense of community where this may have been eroded or damaged. Here they described their experiences:

**Ms. Nangurai:** We hold meetings with the parents to bring them on board to our programs. We also have reconciliation programs where we try to help them reconcile, and recognize that she is still their daughter. It is very difficult. We call a meeting, we call another. Like now we have three parents who have refused to come. Going against the traditions and the culture was not easy. I forgot to tell you that we hold culture talks where old women come and talk to the girls on their culture. And sometimes we hold debates we go through the cultures and say which ones are good which ones are not and some of them walk out in protest. Especially when we touch on circumcision. But it’s important, it’s important for them to know what is expected of them. Yeah, coz whatever they are those are their parents

**Dr. Riria:** Coming to your point is that we have been able to access financial and non-financial services to women. My daughters laugh when I say that every woman must have God in the middle, some money and some gold. My daughters laugh. Women must have money. We are beginning to find that in Africa, women need money, but they need something else. This is where I have coined a word, they need credit plus. The plus, money is not enough. We need to empower them. Because the years of dehumanization and seeing that there is no woman who gets a good position. You know these things work like that. All those we call that domestication. Years of domestication have relegated the woman to the second position in the society.

**Ms. Achieng:** As we said we are actors we are not victims. We want to speak for ourselves. We are not speaking only for women and children; we are speaking for the families here. We are speaking for security at home, who is the main victim of war? It’s that woman out there. Nobody cares for this woman. We do spend time on men’s care, but nobody is caring for the women. If we are talking about politics and about this war,
we don’t sleep. When they come home at midnight we have to get up, the sleep disappears. You have to provide him with food, water, and so on. And if he wants to read or he wants to stay you are still awake. When he goes to bed then you go to bed. That particular time is your time, keeping peace, providing peace, and that is our identity. We also advocate that we are women, daughters, mothers, wives; we don’t belong to any tribe because we can marry anybody.

**Dr. Nguru:** By the way we also got a eh, it’s a very dry place where we have the school. So another sacrifice and we got a borehole sank in the school. So the school at one point had water for its own use and for the community. So we had the community members coming and getting water from there and that was a real gift for them we have a prayer day every year usually comes on 11 October which is the day that the late wife of my husband passed away and we want to keep it as a memorial. So we do community service, either clean up exercises, or do some project for the community. If we manage this year we are thinking of putting up a bus stop shelter outside the school on the road from Embu to Kitui. There is a year we gave out some wheelchairs. My husband happens to be the chairman of some organization that had brought in some wheelchairs. We asked for people who needed wheelchairs and they came that day. We talked to them. We gave some at the school and we took some to the school for the handicapped. That was also a very fulfilling thing being able to do, to facilitate these kinds of resources. There are people who are willing to give wheelchairs, they don’t know who to give, and here we are, we can facilitate the movements of these very needed items. This year if we get the resources we can build the bus shelter. We have a few days to think about it.

For African contexts, building community can be more about developing an already existing community by empowering women economically in order for them to provide for their families such as what Dr. Riria does. Such women engage in small-scale entrepreneurial undertakings such as community schools and small-scale businesses. In other contexts, it means building peace in order to re-build community where years of war have left people displaced and disenfranchised. Yet in other cases like that of Dr. Nguru, it is utilizing available resources for community building and service – above and beyond the call of duty as an organizational leader. Whatever the case, the women illustrate servant-leadership as community restoration in their various ways.
Summary of Servant Leadership

In looking at the quotes utilized to illustrate the various ways that women leaders demonstrate servant leadership, it is clear that other elements of leadership are also illustrated. These include spirituality as it relates to servant-leadership, and tempered radical elements as they interact with servant-leadership. As such, it does seem to be that the elements of the conceptual framework are distinguishable but inseparable as they work in concert to illustrate holistic African women leadership experiences and practices. As such, spirituality forms the undergirding principle behind both tempered radicalism and servant leadership resulting in spiritual leadership.
CHAPTER XII: SPIRITUALITY

In listening to, observing, and reading materials about and by these African women leaders, it became increasingly clear that spirituality is the modus operandi and the raison d'être for their leadership and life. Spirituality seemed to permeate everything they thought about, pursued and talked about, so much so that more often than not, it was an unspoken understanding. This would illustrate what Professor John Mbiti, one of the premier African theologians and philosophers asserted over thirty years ago: that Africans are notoriously religious/spiritual (Mbiti, 1969). Often times in analyzing the transcripts, it was clear that the same quotes that illustrated servant leadership also illustrated spiritual leadership. In the same way, many of the quotes that illustrate tempered radicalism also point forward to spiritual foundation for action. In the following pages, I demonstrate how the African women leaders in this study talked about and illustrate spirited leadership.

Spirituality as a Source of Direction and Purpose for Life and Leadership

Some researchers found that Africana women utilize spirituality as a source of direction and purpose for their lives and their professions (Dillard et al., 2000; Jones, 2003; Mattis, 2002). The following quotes illustrate how the African women leaders in this study used theistic spirituality to explain why they do what they do – spirituality was the foundation for purpose for life, and a sense of direction as leaders:

Ms Thongori: I remember praying to God many many mornings that God give me a purpose for life... So I like to give encouragement or direction to peoples projects. So what am I saying? Yes, I actually don’t have to be involved everywhere in every board that exists. We can give so much leadership, especially when we are not looking for leadership that is written down, ‘Judy Thongori is a board member here and there’, especially when you are true to yourself, and you know you are accountable to your God, you know whatever it is God I have done, even in court, when someone comes and talks to me about cases, I will never ever shut them out. I give free advice, family advice, I get
so excited and am walking on air because I have been able to help somebody. (You look so excited!) I am, I am! I am! I get so excited, I feel so good. I like to solve problems.

**Dr. Riria:** So as I said I think my upbringing, my attitude, family attitude, school, because the catholic school was very forward looking, I think it has made me who I am today. And then of course something inside of me, something I don’t know, which I attribute to God. Its what drives me, its somewhere, its something I don’t control. And even when I want to give up, it says don’t give up. People don’t think that, people think I am so strong that I don’t want to give up. But I have my moments, my deep moments.

**Hon Ngilu:** God knows that am on the right track. It is not the masses that are right… I may be alone, but it is right.

**Dr. Mombo:** I felt that God was calling me but I couldn’t be exactly sure where. I wanted to teach adults not children. But I felt that there was a whole area of struggling to convince my father.

**Rev Mbugua:** You will read in my book that I left school as a very young girl, at 16, got married at 18, and so I had not finished school. I had to finish my secondary school by private education. Indeed not only by private education but also I was married, because I had children. But that transition between getting married as a kid, and becoming a mother and getting responsible. I had come from a very good family, very rich family. My dad had gone to alliance high school believe it or not in those early years. I think he said he was student number 36. So I had the opportunity of going to school. But falling in love and whatever, and getting married at 18, so I had come from a sheltered life. To a very vulnerable time of life where I become a mother when I was very young and had responsibility when I was very young. And that gap, I thank God for that gap because had I remained in that sheltered life, I would not have taken life very seriously. I was the kind of A student who could have gone from there to alliance, then to any university I wanted, and then become a professor at whatever time. And I would not have identified my own purpose of life. I see that God wanted me to work with women, so he had to give me an opportunity to suffer, and really suffer… So back to the question of how did I get here. It started with a need. God made me realize that need and God made me answer the question what will you do about it. And my whole life that is what it has been… women know that if I know what it means to shed tears, I can identity. So they can say if Judy loves God in spite of all that she has gone through, and then it is possible to love God. And that is leadership by identification, you identify with the people so you are not just standing there saying the book says, instead, I know what you are feeling because I have been there.

Ms Thongori’s work revolves around fighting for the rights of women against their men-folk; fathers, husbands, husband’s relatives, even brothers who would deny the women a right to own property. However, she started out her career as a corporate lawyer before a sense of
dissatisfaction and restlessness led her to seek what she describes as a more spiritually fulfilling path – even though it is less economically viable because a large percentage of her work is pro bono for poor women. Dr. Riria, the CEO of Kenya Women’s Finance Trust, a banking institution whose mission is accessing credit facilities to women for small-to-medium scale businesses, gave up a career as a university professor to engage in the work of women and development. Here she explains her life work in terms of being divinely driven. Hon Ngilu, the minister for Health in the Kenyan government and a persistent government critic explains her positioning in terms of divine accountability – as long as God approves, it doesn’t matter what others think. She has faced a lot of criticism in her attempts at providing poor people with affordable healthcare through a national bill of health which failed to pass in parliament. Dr. Mombo, the academic dean at St. Paul’s University knew that she wanted to serve God by providing theological education, but she needed to prove to her father that it was an economically viable option to take. Reverend Mbugua began a ministry to serve women because she could identify with their struggles, and became one who leads by identification. In each case, the women explain their life journeys and career choices in terms of being God-directed.

Spirituality as a Source of Leadership Practices

Some researchers found that Africana people explain their leadership and professional practices in moral, ethical and spirited terminology (Dantley, 2003a, 2003b; Dillard et al., 2000; Jones, 2003; Mattis, 2002). African women leaders in this study explained that they lead because of a divine compulsion to engage in transforming communities or individuals lives by giving service. The following quotes illustrate this phenomenon:

**Prof. Nguru:** I get fulfillment from knowing that I have touched somebody’s life, that somebody’s life will not be the same because of a certain encounter. Like the work I am doing with the house helps, even with the students in the school. I am excited that they are able to have a Christian context in which they are learning. I don’t know the kind of
homes they are coming from. But at least they have prayer at assembly in the morning; there is the teaching of values, there so helping them, giving them direction in life that is godly. Some of course will go and become wayward, but others maybe will forever eh, something will have been planted so that as they go to high school they will have something to hold on to. In fact the parents have been urging us to build a high school. Some go to public schools, others to all sorts of schools. Where will these students go to? Some of them go to public schools and all those things we have taught, they disappear. So that’s where I get fulfillment, that lives are being changed as I interact with them. And that am doing God’s will which is establishing his kingdom in peoples lives, so whatever am doing whether it’s in education or Christian work. The skills that God has given women, organizational skills, management, they are in built. But sometimes they are squashed either by the system, or by training or by circumstances.

Ms Anisia: I think one of the areas in leadership is having convictions about what you are doing. I think if you don’t have faith, you just have to increase your faith, you don’t bear, and you will not have that strong leadership. Leadership, to sustain being vision, to sustain being tolerant, to sustain being strong, you have to have faith. When your faith is increased by what you are doing, not by just going to the church and praying. My outside work, and outside activity must not relate different from my beliefs. My conversations must relate with my faith. It does not mean I cannot relate with non-Christians, but it must mean that they have to be seeing from me that my faith is my strength and it should be seen by God and my children. My five years living single, I don’t change. I am still a married woman in my own way. Married life doesn’t mean that you always have a man and have sex and so on. I do a lot of prayer, I do go out to fellowship.

Ms Wahu: it is the spirit that moves mountains. This is the time of spirituality …because it gives you the capacity to pursue the truth without illusion. I think as you hear me talk, you can get the courage that I have and the commitment that I have and the energy that I have. It’s not because of the breakfast that I ate. No! It’s because of the spirit that is inspiring me. Then I am emboldened within the parameters of my Christian faith. I confess Christ as my savior and if he could die for our liberation, we are only being asked to act upon our liberation. That’s what I am determined to do. And that will be done without fear or favor. It will be done with courage and determination inspired differently not by the gains that you are going to get. So fulfillment of life which is very spiritual is the basis for all this.

Ms Ole Marima: Without being spiritually strong, I would not be able to make it. I seek divine intervention, and am not a fundamentalist, actually am not even a charismatic, I worship at Nairobi Baptist church and AIC, but I draw my strength from God. I would be dry, absolutely dry, if I remove him from all that am doing, am a dry bone. I grow everyday he is the one who renews my strength, he renews my brain, because on my own am not able to do that. When I tell people am fifty-three, they say, Mom you are lying. If you see my first-born he is about 35 or 36. So, it is a direct link. The only mediator I have to deal with the mighty God. That’s the basic line in my life. And that’s why I have come this far.
These quotes demonstrate how for these women leaders, spirituality gives them courage to act, enables them to be committed to a vision of social justice, and energizes their struggle in the same. Ms Wahu explained that for her, fulfillment of life comes from her spiritual engagement. Prof Nguru felt that she too derives her fulfillment from the Spirit. In addition, her choice to engage in providing affordable values-based education to children in her rural home as a second mission was motivated by her relationship with God. Ms Anisia explained that leadership by conviction is a result of having a faith that is active and engaged. In each instance, the women attributed the tools they employ in leadership such as courage, conviction, and the compulsion to lead as spiritually directed. For these women leaders, service to community not only includes everybody else, but demands that much more because most of them serve those marginalized by society due to their poverty, lack of education and low gender status for women. The search for peace and social justice overrides personal comfort; it is a compelling call to action that the women dare not ignore. As such, their being tempered radicals is dependent on the boldness and inspiration from their spiritual connection with God and with others. These quotes also illustrate other aspects of spirituality in general as expressed by women leaders such as using it as a source of a moral-ethical compass, and finding strength from having a deep spirituality.

Spirituality as a Source of Strength in the Midst of Challenges

Mattis (2002) and Jones (2003) found that African-American women utilized their spirituality to cope with the challenges wrought upon their lives by racial discrimination, structural injustices, personal problems, illnesses and professional struggles. Similarly, the African women leaders interviewed talked about how they deal with leadership and personal
challenges in terms of prayer, finding supporters, and getting help when they are weak. The following quotes demonstrate the women’s experiences and explanations:

**Dr Riria:** So, when I can’t go on, I pray and God hears my prayers so much. Once I do that I see a way out. I never get desperate. I get depressed, get really challenged but never desperate and I have never felt alone. Because I really I have never felt I am desperate to a point where I don’t find value in life. I may feel so challenged that I don’t know what to do, I wake up in the middle of the night and I don’t know what to do. I am really discouraged I feel that I can stay in bed the whole of the next day. But I pray, and I am telling you prayer is so powerful. And I have told my staff that and they seem to have taken it in.

**Ms Nangurai:** And also, when someone from the community comes and tells me ‘thank you for what you did. My daughter is now helping me; she is the one who took me to hospital’, then now you really, and God. Yeah, and God I should not forget that. I keep telling people that God keeps sending me angels, coz you have to work through people. Like if I talk about Rev Joyce (my liaison for the study), she just came. She just came and when she came here we talked and I was strengthened. So there are people who support even if they are not able to give financial support, they give moral support.

**Ms Anisia:** I had a very bad accident. So the accident, normally when you work volunteer you are not insured. But I was fortunate that many friends from Europe pay in Nairobi hospital. But I believe my healing was based on Gods grace. Just two months I was back to my peace work, nobody could believe it.

**Dr. Mombo:** Even when I was being treated as a child and my morality being scrutinized, my focus was that God had called me here. I served for 8 years…It’s lonely to be a woman leader, because you can’t enter fully the male world, as much as you try to work within it. Because they still have their own clichés and phrases that you might not understand. Your fellow women mistrust you. You are wooed in their camp. You may not be talking their language so you are also resented. So you are hanging in the middle, without support of the men or the women. It’s a lonely exercise. But for me that’s where my faith comes in because at the very hour of need when I feel God I am alone, then I realize that God’s grace is sufficient for me when I have no one else.

**Dr. Nguru:** I think it (spirituality with leadership) connects in the way that there are times when I even feel weak, I don’t feel like I have the strength, and then I call on a strength beyond mine in prayer as a Christian I ask God to fill me with his power, with his wisdom and with his strength. Because those are other things that I think are required and I don’t have it. And even a love for the people that I am working with. Commitment to their wellbeing and that I cannot generate by myself, it really comes out of my relationship with God who has it all, who has all the love and the patience. And then I draw on, avail myself to that power so that all these things can flow through me.
For these women, spirituality helps them deal with loneliness that comes about as a leadership and personal challenge, giving them strength when they are weak, and helping them when their authority as leaders is questioned. In addition, spirituality gives them power, wisdom and courage to stay the course, to persist rather than give up when the challenges seem insurmountable. As such, their ability to be effective tempered radicals and/or agents of change is rooted in the strength, power and courage derived from their spirituality. Spirituality enables them to love those they work with or for, a challenge when those are the same people making life difficult for the women as leaders. These quotes thus illustrate two elements of Africana spirituality that Paris (1995) discussed namely, Beneficence and Forbearance. One of the greatest virtues that an African person can exemplify is beneficence or altruistic love

Because it exemplifies the goal of community as it is internalized by individual persons and community leaders. That is to say, the individual’s disposition is so shaped by the ultimate goal of community that he or she finds contentment in facilitating the wellbeing of others. (Paris, 1995, p. 136-137)

Paris (1995) argued that Africana people developed forbearance out of the multitude of sufferings that they have had to endure in their history such as the dehumanizing racial oppression, economic injustice, political disenfranchisement, etc. In this continuing context, African women developed a resiliency and persistence necessary for survival. African women leaders in this study have acquired the capacity for silent subversive activities in their pursuit of social justice – thus the servant leadership – a style of leadership that is outwardly seem as harmless yet the leaders achieve their goals of social, political, economic and cultural emancipation.
Spirituality and Servant Leadership

These African women leaders find fulfillment in serving humanity – otherwise they would not do the kinds of work they do that require so much effort, struggle, and very little gratitude. They define servant leadership as the kind of leader who finds fulfillment in serving humanity. For them, servant leadership and spirituality are intricately connected as illustrated by the following quotes:

**Ms Gichaga**: One is to emulate Jesus who was the best teacher and the greatest leader of all. As a leader, he was also a servant. I try to utilize some of his teachings in servant leadership. And a little earlier I said am a people person and that again has impacted on me. Because for me as a God fearing person, every person is important. And if I can help I help because remembering the story of Abraham and the angel, whoever is coming through that door could be the angel that God has sent to you, so wherever I can I do that. And it has created peace in the office, coz am not the boss who will shout at people, who will quarreled them because I know there are better ways of settling disputes in amore amicable way in a more godly way so it has had a lot of impact. The other thing is just humility. I may be so senior and I know I have met very powerful leaders and you never get to know who they are until they stand up to introduce themselves. They have made it, but you don’t have to sing about it. Let people discover with time as they interact with you. Humility is very key.

**Dr. Riria**: And we were also taught humbleness because you get to a point that you think you can’t then get somebody to do it for you at that point. So it taught you to trust yourself but also to trust the input of others.

**Ms Thongori**: Lee taught me the humility that ought to attend to the practice of law. I think he is the one who has taught me, I think when we came from law school, we were not taught to serve. We graduated so that we could come to the city, make money and actually be served as it were. I learnt about service, and service for me is basic. Lee is now at the Arusha Tribunal and I look at him and his getting appointed to that kind of job with that kind of money and I realize that I don’t need to be greedy about money. It will all come down in due course. Yeah.

**Hon Ngilu**: I hope that some day soon, those in elected office will not be the masters, but instead will humble themselves to be servants of the people. This is where women come in because women have always been servants, right from their kitchens, their churches, their communities and their schools. Women are born servants, always ready to serve the family, the community, and soon the nation too. We haven’t seen (political) leaders yet because women have yet to arise.
Prof. Nguru: By using Biblical terminology, one would say not to lord it over the people. Because I have seen that work all the time. That you come around a table, people want to be affirmed to reach their potential and in that way, they perform to their best. Currently at daystar now I am coordinating a program of training in the region and I see that I still use tools and skills of working with people. Recognizing them, helping them maintain their dignity and helping them to do their best. And a commitment, I mean really where your word is, when you say yes you mean yes. And if it’s a no it’s a no. but when you have decided to do something, to go out and give it your best.

Greenleaf (1977) and Spears (2002) described servant leaders as people who felt the need to serve who then seek to lead in order to serve. Such leaders are humble, they empower those they lead, they are interested in building community, and they affirm and encourage those they lead to reach their full potential as illustrated by these African women leaders. In addition, the African women leaders ascribe their learning to be servant leaders from their traditional culture, as a women-specific cultural trait where they serve in their families and communities. As citizens of dual realities – the African Traditional Religious spirituality and the Christian traditions – they also explain their servant leadership as modeled after Jesus’ or Biblical examples. This illustrate the syncretistic leanings of the currently expressed Africana spirituality as having strong Christian and African traditional values.

Practical Wisdom/Critical Spirituality

Dantley (2003) coined the phrase ‘critical spirituality’ to describe a spirituality that combines two radical perspectives thus:

The element of critique and deconstruction of undemocratic power relations is blended with spiritual reflection grounded in an African American sense of moralism, prophetic resistance, and hope in order to form the viscera of this hybrid theoretical construct called critical spirituality. (p. 5)
Similarly, Paris (1995) conceptualized an element of Africana spirituality that is similar to critical spirituality thus: “Practical wisdom is excellence of thought that guides good actions. This virtue pertains to the measure of cognitive discernment necessary for determining what hinders good action and what enables it… the fully developed capacity of a free moral agent” (p. 144). The quotes below demonstrate how these African women leaders deconstructed social constructs such as religion, culture, gender roles, and leadership:

**Rev Mbugua:** One of them is God’s faithfulness and God’s desire for women to rise up. Because I have seen all these openings that he has given us which shows for sure it is his desire for us to rise up and then, another lesson I have learnt is tolerance. Because before I would get very impatient with men and feel like they were being inconsiderate about women. But now I realize that they too are ignorant. They too were brought in the same circumstances like us that women are inferior and men are superior. So this has enabled me to have the patience to even work out sometimes behind the scenes to ensure that men are trained. Coz I realize that there are so many trainings for women but men are not being trained. To the extent that in getting married, there is so much counseling for the girls. Come to the day of the wedding, all the speeches are ‘you do this for him you know men are this you cook’, but hardly do you hear anybody telling the men, ‘and men you provide or you do this or you do that’. No no no they are just built up to be a lion and whatever. I have developed some patience to know that men don’t just do this deliberately. They don’t know also. It is to empower the men. And as I said because they cannot go directly and empower them, its to go behind the scenes…So as I said, if you stand there and start telling men you don’t know so I want to teach you, they will refuse. So we have worked behind the scenes and encouraged pastors to be trained. So we do it behind the scenes without coming out and saying we are teaching them. We don’t say we are teaching you. But making sure they are taught however they are taught.

**Ms Wanyeki:** The first question you have to ask for example in FGM is what exactly about it was supposed to be cultural, then you come to the fact that maybe not necessarily the physical pain, but the teaching, then you are like ok so what are the teachings, and then you are like o my God this is so sexist. Can we have a different rite of passage that flips the script around, and I think some of the most interesting work in Africa is being done by people who are willing to do that kind of exploration and reinterpretation of culture and religion and so on.

**Dr. Abuom:** So, these alliance building is very critical. For me the future leadership is first to draw from the historical biological processes and attributes that women have evolved for surviving the onslaught of oppression. And structuring that into coherent leadership model, and then applying those models in the various positions. Because we will go a long way in doing that, you can’t lead without alliances. You can’t lead without
support and without the feedback because you need to know where you stand...be a woman. The world needs caring leadership and nurturing leadership. It doesn’t want this killing, cutting each other’s feet off. The world needs the consultative kind of leadership not the solo approach, the hero. We have gone beyond the stage of heroism. For me that is one of my dreams.

**Ms Wahu:** Of course me I go straight to leadership. The first thing I read here is that leadership is dominated by men. And leadership to me, I understand it from the point of view of service to humanity. We confuse leadership and control because what we experience is domination by control, rule by iron hand which is not feminine at all at all. And, I thank God our role is very clear on what we need to do. We need to nurture life, and I think that is what is holding African nations because the African women have been able to play that role seriously consciously or even sometimes unconsciously. And for there, for such I say, in my view as an African woman, leadership is not dominated by men. We are in leadership, we lead at home, and we lead in communities. When we are doing for example a small thing like a funeral or mourning process, the women are the ones saying and doing and making things happen. I say this because our men just are co-opted by the leadership that controls and dominates other people to deliver us for labor and to deliver our resources. Therefore, they are anti their society, they don’t serve their society. That’s what I would make as a contribution as far as leadership is concerned. And therefore, that’s why we have gaps and that’s why we are still very dissatisfied on the question of leadership in Africa. Because leadership in Africa does not lead Africans, but it is co-opted to deliver Africa for another expediency which is not African... So what happens now because the leadership that we know is ruler ship, we haven’t deconstructed that, when you join them, you have to destroy the women that you are and become a man. You can see the way they behave sometimes. So, and that’s why, as women we have to liberate leadership first from ruler ship, by bringing that capacity for leadership, just as we are saying here and am glad the way reverend has put it, that how we even lead in the kitchen is very important. It is that model that we need to bring into the public domain.

**Ms Wahu:** We are doing an operation of our society, and we are putting item by item there which is a malignancy, and look for a cure. Actually it’s very ironical that patriarchy dictates that the man is the one to protect and give security, but in actuality it is the mothers who provide and who give security. So you see the contradiction, and I think that is how currently we need to deconstruct and I hope you can do it, deconstructing the patriarchy arrangement.

**Dr. Mombo:** So I find the support of women. I look for women who can buy the feminist view. Because I realize that feminism is refusing to be a doormat. And I refuse to be a doormat. Trying to invite people like Professor Wangari to come and talk to my students has proven impossible hurdle. Because ‘here she is inviting other feminists to talk to the students’. It’s a very narrow conception of feminism. Trying to move way from those narrow conceptions is very hard because of the socialization of both men and women into patriarchy.
These quotes illustrate the various ways that the women leaders articulated well thought out critiques of social structures. Not only did they offer a critique to demonstrate what is wrong with such structures, but they also sought to reconstruct them to be more socially just. For instance, Rev Mbugua deconstructed patriarchy as it relates to the roles that men and women play, and illustrated how she has sought to change that by acting behind the scenes to institute men’s training programs. This suggests that the ability to deconstruct social structures may be a pre-requisite to effective action as a change agent/tempered radical. Similarly, Dr Mombo recognized the problems inherent in the problems inherent in being branded a feminist, and sought to show by her example that a feminist is a woman who chose not to be a doormat. She deconstructed the connotations attached to the label feminist and reconstructed feminism to suit her and the other women on the campus who needed to have a voice. Ms Wahu sought to deconstruct the masculine variety of rulership that masquerades as leadership, and demonstrated how women act as leaders in their nurturing and life sustaining roles. Dr Abuom sought to deconstruct culture, to sought out the good from the bad and use the good to alter society towards justice goals. Ms Wanyeki sought to also deconstruct culture and to find useful lessons that could be utilized in attempting to stamp out FGM. In each case, the leaders not only gave a critique, but also gave solutions to the problems that emanate from those social constructs. Their reinterpretations of culture, gender roles, leadership, and religion are tools that aid them in their activism and advocacy for change as tempered radicals and servant leaders.

Dissonance

Whereas fifteen women leaders, plus the liaison all talked about their leadership being impacted by their spirituality, Ms Muthoni Wanyeki did not. Ms Wanyeki was uncomfortable
with being regarded as a leader, and was even more uncomfortable with a discussion of

spirituality. Below is part of our conversation:

Ms Wanyeki: The idea of being single and young, I am always seen as young particularly because I am not married and don’t have children and so on. And to finally accept that and to see that is the context from which they come from but it doesn’t mean we cant exchange ideas and that happened after a while. And, I mean, that maybe we are both, the democracy and the women’s movement, which is more sort of legal based, policy based and so on has a lot to learn from the older kind of development community about how you actually work in the long term with people. Yeah, and I guess, I mean the, the trick is to leave your anger at the system and to find a way out of crossing that divide.

Faith: So based on what you said about being regarded as young because you are not married and have no children, what do we need to do as a younger generation who are attempting to lead so that the older ones can listen to us?

Ms Wanyeki: First I think there is something wrong with the idea of attempting to lead. I don’t think I have ever attempted to lead. I think I have attempted to find a way that I can contribute in some way my ideas to bear on a situation. And that has meant trying to maneuver to find a way to live materially, but also all the other kinds of social capital like contacts and so on. Yeah and in the end I think your beliefs and your commitments show through your work and eventually that does count for something. So for me I don’t see it as a generational battle or something, I see it as you know, we have to find space to make our ideas live in this context, and in the process of doing that you can up against all these dynamics, generational, class, and, you try and deal with it.

Faith: So, tell me how you would describe yourself as a leader?

Ms Wanyeki: Here again I am kind of resistant to the idea that I am a leader.

Faith: What about leadership is putting you off the idea of your being a leader? Or, what would you rather describe yourself as?

Ms Wanyeki: Gosh, I don’t actually know. I think there is something else, somebody else came to interview me and asked, why would you think you are successful? And again I was sort of taken aback, and I don’t think I am successful. I think there are some areas where I have achieved and there are areas of my life that are a complete disaster, you know, and even in terms of what I have achieved, I myself see the shortcomings of that all the time, I am quite aware of what can, should be happening and what is actually happening. So I think, there is something just a bit arrogant in describing yourself that way.
**Faith:** So, let’s try a different one. By the way I can hear you, I can definitely hear you. Yet even by virtue of your office, you are the director here. So that makes you a leader. I suspect you are also an opinion leader, in terms of there are some things you might be saying that other people are not as comfortable saying or are not necessarily willing to stand up for. But maybe the other word to use other than leadership is that you are serving? 

**Ms Wanyeki:** That has religious overtones. But I know what you mean. What are you trying to get at, like what qualities? Ok. In terms of qualities, I think first and foremost I don’t think I am a dishonest person. I am honest in terms of if I believe something in terms of what can and should happen, then that is what I will stand up to defend. Certainly I think I do have the capacity to stand up and defend ideas for myself but also for other people. I think those two things, and the idea of acting, forcing yourself to act on an issue even when you can see there is going to be consequences, that is really important. And once you’ve done so, to be prepared to deal with the consequences. I think that’s very important. I think another thing is, the idea that I, I mean very much in terms of my work in Canada and the sort of theories that inform me and my own beliefs were very much around collectivism, communalism and so on and I think that, those things are not just ideas they are things you have to practice. And you can practice them even in hierarchical situations. This is a hierarchical organization, I found it that way, I can see some value of having it that way, but it doesn’t mean that you don’t then still try and bring in the ideas that you expect to be treated with some dignity and respect so does everyone around you. And how do you enable that to happen. And applies even when organizing collectively with a huge group of people, its difficult because people have all kinds of expectations in any given situation and again you can get very frustrated. You know you think you have opened up space or enabled space to be opened and all you get are these stabbings on the back or misunderstandings or people acting in their self-interest rather than collectivity, but that’s all part of the process. Yeah.

When I reflected on Ms Wanyeki’s resistance to calling herself or being regarded as a leader, I realized that as a woman who is regarded as young by the majority culture – as long as a woman is unmarried and has no children, she is considered to be young – she did not feel comfortable thinking of herself as a leader. She was the executive director of a pan-African organization, African Women Communication and Development Network (FEMNET), a position she had held since 1999. However, the older women who made up the board were still in control, such that her work was limited to administrative and managerial duties rather than hands on leading, directing, initiating programs, etc. As such, she felt like her hands were
somewhat tied. In addition, as a woman who had grown up in a home where religion was neither encouraged nor discouraged, and who had since developed a dislike for organized religion, she wasn’t comfortable with any terminology that reeked of religious overtones, such as service. Yet when she described herself, she talked about being honest, being willing to die for the cause, standing up for what she believes is right, being able to work alongside semi-literate rural women effectively even though she herself was born and bred in cities, attempting to be a change agent in the organization as well as in society; all these descriptions fit both servant leader and tempered radical who is guided by spiritual, rather than necessarily religious values. Although she is in her early forties, single and has no children, she fits in with the rest of the women in that she too is fighting for social justice, and even though she is not religious, her values are deeply spiritual, actually deeply African and spiritual. Below our conversation continued as I sort to find out why she is so resistant to anything that smacks of religion:

**Faith:** You sort of jumped at the idea of service and you said that has religious overtones. And I was actually gonna ask you a question that might smell of religion, but the question is what gives you strength, what keeps you going everyday when you are doing a job you love but you have also to do administration which you would rather not be doing. But if you are in a position like this, you have to do it. So where do you find your source of strength to keep going?

**Ms Wanyeki:** I mean, I think that I still believe in the possibility of transformation. But the other thing is I have a fairly strong family, a very wide network of friends, including older people who have been involved in politics and who take the time with me, and then of course I have my friends that I socialize with. I think its important to have as many people in that social network. And then, more recently, I have learnt to deliberately take time out for myself. I used to compete in sports and for a couple of years I had completely let that slide. I don’t compete any more but I do train regularly, I do do things that are taking care of myself. But mostly its people, people who inspire me and keep me going.

**Faith:** So here is something that might smell of religion. What does your spirituality have to with all this? And note I did not say religion
Ms Wanyeki: You picked up on that fast. I don’t know, I mean, I wasn’t really brought up in any religious tradition. Yes I went to a catholic school and had to do that stuff. But my family is not religious, they are not really anti, but they are not really pro either. And I guess most of us have some connection to a world-organized religion. I guess I was exposed a lot more to Christianity so I do know sort of what it teaches beyond institutions but you know, I have I think such a strong critique of institutional Christianity and how it affects women, how it entered the continent in the first place, and, you know, so, I don’t know, I mean I have heard a lot about a lot of different religious beliefs. Obviously because of my work and working in Africa, I am very interested in women in Islam and so on, and you know, trying to find ways to negotiate in a manner that advances women has been a big part of my work. But in terms of anything I follow myself and I belief in myself, not really.

As such, it becomes clear that Ms Wanyeki is spiritually motivated to seek social justice, a spirituality that is a blend of values learnt from various religious and indigenous traditions, rather than a single religious tradition. She however felt that whereas she is interested in religion as a matter of course in her work of gender, communication and development, she does not follow any one religion. Hers is a syncretistic spirituality, a blending of values that she found resonating with who she wants to be as an African woman who is keen on social justice issues.

Summary

In this chapter, I have explored how African women leaders in this study expressed and explained their version of spirited leadership. They explained that the Spirit gives them courage to act, wisdom to choose their battles, energy and inspiration to keep fighting for justice, and is the compelling force behind their tempered radicalism as well as servant leadership. Spirituality is both a source of personal strength as well as a raison d’être of their leadership. It is infused in everything they say and do, in their critiques of current structures of leadership or rulership, in their very lifestyles of both boldness and humility. It is so deeply embedded in their psyche as to be almost inseparable from who they are and what they do. For one such as myself who is steeped in both western education and African roots, it was refreshing to see how these African
women leaders have blended their traditional spirituality and Judeo-Christian values to exhibit a profound spirituality that is both relevant and contextual. Whereas they explain a lot of their spirituality in terms of Christian values and Biblical terminology, it was also possible to perceive their *africanness*. More importantly, it was evident that their spirituality is also influenced by their experience as women in Africa who have undergone intersecting oppressions from their geographical location in a third world nation, their gender in a neo-patriarchal culture, their positions as leaders in a male-dominated public sphere, their ethnicity, sometimes even their age and marital status. Their practical wisdom or critical spirituality enabled them to deconstruct several social constructs including culture and religion, and leadership looking at how each of these impacts upon women’s existence and leadership experiences. In the next chapter, I will further elaborate on the interconnections between the elements of the conceptual framework as I seek to reframe it, as well as explicate my personal journey, in addition to providing suggestions for further study.
CHAPTER XIV: FINAL RESONANCE

Overview of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore, explain and seek to understand women’s leadership through the lived experiences of sixteen women leaders from Africa. The study is an exploration of how selected women leaders navigate the intersecting oppressive forces of gender, culture, religion, social norm stereotypes, race, marital status, and age as they attempt to lead for social justice. The central biographical approach utilized for this study was portraiture, with the express aim of celebrating and learning from the resiliency and strength of the women leaders in the face of adversities and challenges to their authority as leaders. Leadership was understood as influence (Yukl, 2001) and as a process of meaning making amongst people to engender commitment to common goals, expressed in a community of practice (Drath & Palus, 1994). I presented short herstories of eleven women leaders, and in depth portraits of five others with whom I was more intimately engaged and who best illustrated and expanded upon the a priori conceptual framework.

The significance of this study is based upon the fact that women’s leadership has been a subject of scholarly and practitioner debates for a while, but African women’s voices have not hitherto been included in that debate. This study then contributes to the understanding of leadership by adding the voices of African women, their own voices as I have interpreted them through the use of the conceptual framework. In addition, leadership scholars and practitioners from around the globe can gain valuable insights into leadership by reading about this different perspective; they will be both inspired and informed. Furthermore, the portraits presented here provide an illuminating look at leadership as experienced in a particular context in a way that should resonate with audiences everywhere. They illustrate how the local becomes global, and
the global local. That is, even though this study was undertaken in a particular socio-historical, cultural and geographical context, the themes that emerged can be utilized in other contexts that are not necessarily the same as Nairobi, Kenya in East Africa. This study is also significant for the participants; as some of them said, it gave them a chance to reflect on their own leadership experiences and to pass on their wisdom gained from struggle and survival to future generations and to audiences in other locations through the written form of the dissertation.

The guiding question for this study has been: what does it mean to be a woman leader in an African context? The a priori conceptual framework consisted of three elements: Africana spirituality, tempered radicalism and servant-leadership. My thought had been that as evidenced by studies of black women in America, the participants were likely to be guided by a spiritual focus that would help them as they attempted to lead as active change agents and servant leaders. This conceptual framework was affirmed by the data, but with certain modifications.

In the second chapter of this dissertation, I explored the literature in four main areas: (a) leadership theories, (b) women in leadership, (c) Black women in leadership, broken down into five areas that relate as intersectionality, spirituality, mentoring, androgynous leadership styles and servant leadership, and (d) African women and leadership. This literature helped to demonstrate the gap that exists as far as leadership is concerned in the areas of black women and leadership, and African women and leadership to which this study makes a significant contribution. The literature helped to demonstrate that seminal theories, refereed journals and mainstream texts do not provide sufficient information when it comes to leadership from a non-western, non-male, non-white perspective.

In the methodological framework chapter, I explained as exhaustively as possible my research methodology, including how my personal experiences played into the methods, research
questions, participants and narrative structure of this study. I identified my value assumptions, political inclinations, and disciplinary experiences that all combined to shape the direction that I took for this inquiry. I explained why portraiture was the ideal inquiry methodology as it enabled me to remain culturally responsive, contextually aware and to combine both aesthetics and empirical rigor in witnessing, interpreting and writing the narratives and themes that form the bulk of the study. I also discussed the need for a liaison as a sponsor or patron to help me in gaining access to women leaders in a culture where this was the most appropriate approach. I explained my stance as a child-researcher, a young women leader who was intent on learning from the rich experiences of her wizened elders. I discussed areas where I had to make compromises to retain the rapport and relationships that were necessary for this study, such as when I agreed to undertake the focus group the way the women leaders wanted me to rather than the traditional social science method. That is, I agreed to invite a few of my thirty-something women friends to listen in to the elders as they discussed the prompts I had provided, and allowed the younger leaders to ask questions towards the end of our time together.

My participants were 16 women leaders from various sectors and different organizations ranging from grassroots or community organizations, national organizations, Pan-African organizations and global institutions. This range of settings provides the reader with a diversity of experiences and enhanced the breadth of the study as a whole. Whereas I included 11 snapshots of women leaders, I also provided in depth portraits, in order to give the reader a wide as well as deep exposure to leadership as it is experienced and expressed by these African women leaders. I chose my participants by following the advise of my liaison, Reverend Joyce Kariuki as well as the first and oldest participant, Mrs. Muthoni Likimani. In addition, some of the women would recommend that I talk to another woman to gain different perspectives on the
phenomenon, thus the sampling was purposive and snowball. By providing sixteen very different experiences, and five exhaustive life stories, I aimed at both inspiring and informing the leader: informing about leadership experiences from a non-western, Global South location; inspiring the reader towards agency for social justice wherever he or she may practice his or her leadership.

For data gathering, the primary data sources were the in depth face to face conversations I had with the participants, some for a longer time and at a deeper level than others. The average length of a face-to-face conversation was 1 ½ hours, with some running for four hours and others running for just over an hour. These conversations took place between June 1st and September 4th 2005 in Nairobi or Kajiado. The focus group was held on 19th September 2005 whereby I presented the participants with a list of probes that were actually emerging themes that I wanted them to discuss and further clarify. In addition, the focus group included five of my friends as I had been advised by Ms Wahu Kaara and Mrs. Muthoni Likimani to bring them along. None of the women filled in the biographical questionnaire, perhaps pointing back to the fact that Africans are still a mainly oral people and would rather talk than write. All the observations took place as I was waiting to speak with the women, or as I was speaking with them, or sometimes when I would go into their offices, wait and have my interview re-scheduled. As such, the observations were non-intrusive and simply added to the data that I utilized in creating their portraits.

I tape recorded all the conversations, expect for the one with Honorable Ngilu which took place when I was not as prepared, I had gone to her office to get an appointment with her secretary when she saw me and invited me in. Also some of the tapes for the rather lengthy conversations with Mrs. Likimani did not work, but I had her autobiography to fall back on as she kept telling me that most of what she was narrating to me would appear in the book. I
transcribed all the tapes for myself, often attempting to do this as soon after the conversation as possible when the information was still fresh in my mind. I also audio and video taped the focus group; the DVD I produced from the focus group was very useful as I was filling in some of the gaps from the audio, because it does get very difficult to capture many different voices in one tape – some were soft and inaudible until I listened and watched the DVD. I recorded all non-verbal expressions, physical setting, and any other information that later enhanced my interpretation of the data. The thoughts that I recorded during the conversations, as well as while I was transcribing were also useful later on in the analysis process.

Initially, I would read through the transcripts and take note of anything that jumped out at me, or that seemed to be repeated several times within the same person’s transcript, as well as between transcripts. I did this several times, reading through each transcript until I was sure that I had taken note of anything and everything of interest. Later on, I attempted to code this rough data by attempting to categorize it to fit, expand or discount the contextual framework. I wrote several papers for presentation at various conferences while I was still in the process of analyzing data, which helped to further refine my analysis process, especially the coding and categorizing of various themes into the conceptual framework. I utilized all the comments and feedback I received at such conferences to further clarify my categories and coding scheme. This last one, using questions, comments and other forms of feedback received after making presentations at conferences also served as a way to strengthen the hermeneutic process – by helping me gauge whether audiences understood and resonated with the portraits and themes that I was presenting.

In addition to audience feedback, I also utilized readers who helped in strengthening the trustworthiness, credibility and hermeneutic process, as well as using the different data sources
and having the participants review their transcripts. Being as it is that I am located in the United States and my participants are all in Africa, I could not have them review their portraits, but by having them read their transcripts, I was able to assure some level of credibility and trustworthiness of the data and my early interpretations. My second reader, a graduate student at Kent State University helped a great deal by reading the transcripts for the five key participants, the focus group transcript and the five portraits. She provided feedback about areas that needed further clarification to ensure that non-Kenyan readers would be able to access and understand the content of the portraits.

As a form of introduction to the section on snapshots and portraits, I provided a look at the current socio-cultural, political and geographical location and context in which the field study was conducted. This was in order to aid the readers’ comprehension of the content supplied in the snap shots, portraits and themes. The eleven snapshots provided give the reader an idea of who these women leaders are, and how they experience leadership. The five exhaustive portraits give the reader a much deeper look at what it entails for these women to be leaders within their particular African context. In these chapters, I used the women’s own names, as well as the real names of places and events to really place their leadership experiences within the given context. I did this with the expression permission of the participants, nay, their direct request that I do so as they wished to be identified with their stories. They felt that it was important for them to be identified with their own stories, because this ensured that their voices were actually heard, not the voice of a hidden identity. They want everyone who comes across their stories, whether Kenyan, African or from another location to know that these are the real stories, the truthful and honest experiences of identifiable women in a particular historical and national setting.
In the chapters on themes, it became increasingly clear that the three main components of the conceptual framework intersect in practice. As such, even though I separated them in discussing my findings, in reality the women are both tempered radicals and servant leaders; and, their spirituality impacts and is impacted by both. This is an important redefinition of the relationship amongst the three elements of the conceptual framework. Increasingly as I codified and re-codified the constituent themes, I found that several of the themes illustrated two or all three of the elements of the conceptual framework, thus the conclusion that they are all somewhat related. As such, the three, spirituality, servant leadership and tempered radicalism are distinguishable, but in the experiences of these African women leaders, inseparable elements that create a unified whole that I henceforth refer to as spirited leadership. To my way of thinking, Spirited as an adjective to describe the holistic leadership that these women practice is the most apt descriptor. Spirited means several things: forceful, feisty, brave, determined, strong-willed, vigorous, energetic, lively and animated, all words that describe the lived experiences and expressions of leadership for these sixteen women. In looking at the definitions of spirit, several words and phrases stood out that aptly describe the sixteen women leaders themselves, and their beliefs as well as practices: (a) Spirit is an animating or vital principle held to give life to physical organisms, (b) a supernatural essence, (c) the immaterial intelligent or sentient part of a person, (d) the activating or essential principle influencing a person to act in a specified way, and (e) a lively or brisk quality in a person as well as a mental disposition characterized by firmness or assertiveness (from Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary, 11 edition). These descriptors appropriately describe the women leaders in this study, defining their personalities as spiritual and spirited personalities, their beliefs as spiritual beliefs, and their leadership as spiritual and spirited leadership.
Making Meaning

As the elements of the conceptual framework and their constituent themes intersected, so did the enterprise of undertaking this study, in a fashion similar to Jones’ (2003) experience in studying black women administrators in the United States. I found that in terms of literature, especially in attempting to construct a conceptual framework, I was dependent upon the literature on Black women’s experiences in the United States as a template upon which to theorize and understand continental African women’s experiences. Similarly, in explaining the spirituality component, the literature base was African-American more than it was African. However, as was evident from the descriptions of spirituality, African people everywhere share certain characteristics beyond mere skin color. The most important of these is that African peoples everywhere share a history of oppression, whether this is through slavery or through colonialism and their consequent dislocation and identity politics. As such, it should not be surprising that the stories of African women leaders told herein will find resonance in the African American experience and could be described in those terms.

One of the most important themes that emerged in this study and that contributed to holding the three elements of the conceptual framework together was the ability of the women to deconstruct history, culture, religion, leadership and other social constructs. Greenleaf (1977) noted that critique without offering solutions breeds hopelessness. These women leaders not only critiqued social constructions of gender, culture, leadership, religion, and the dominant discourse on history, but also reconstructed these to make them more just, more inclusive of different, or gendered and ethnic points of view. This ability to deconstruct and reconstruct social realities aided them in becoming tempered radicals and servant leaders, in articulating their position vis-à-vis gender, leadership and social justice. Similar to what Jones (2003) found out, this ability is
connected to their traditional African values, which in my case, some explicitly stated, others did not. One of those values as described under spirituality is the virtue of practical wisdom, the ability to observe keenly, perceive correctly and utilize limited knowledge to make perspicacious decisions regarding the realities they face today. This ability is connected to their acuity in historicizing the status of women from colonial period to the current era, showing how the intersections of culture, traditional religion, Christianity, colonialism, westernization and market economy combine to create hegemonic powers that oppress women. But, it is noteworthy that these women do not consider themselves as victims. In the words of Anisia Achieng, they are not victims but active agents of their own emancipation.

Tempered Radicals

Courage, determination, initiating change and more courage are terms that describe well the experiences of these African women as leaders. Their life herstories demonstrated the five points on a continuum of strategies that Meyerson (2001) had conceived of as utilized in making a difference: (a) Resisting quietly and staying true to oneself, (b) turning personal threats into opportunities, (c) broadening impact through negotiation, (d) leveraging small wins, and (e) organizing collective action. In addition to these strategies, the African women leaders also utilized other strategies relevant to their particular contexts: (f) Intercultural boundary spanning, (g) resourcefulness and creative problem solving, (i) learning to be tempered with age and experience, and (j) leveraging their outsider/within positionalities. The last four strategies connected with the other five in that even those who resisted quietly and stayed true to themselves, specifically Ms Nangurai and Prof Nguru, they still utilized intercultural boundary spanning and creative problem solving as part of the repertoire of strategies for efficacious leadership in their contexts. Similarly, whether they happened to be on the more tempered end of
the continuum, or the more radical end, they had experienced transformations through their 
lifespan, as far as wizening up to become tempered by age and experience, and learning to 
leverage their positions as outsiders/within their organizations, nations or cultures. Tempered 
radicalism connected with spirituality because of characteristics such as determination and 
courage that the women constantly talked about as their modus operandi, and in the area of 
critical spirituality, that aids the women in deconstructing and reconstructing dominant 
discourses. All the aforementioned strategies were also useful in their agency as servant leaders.

Servant Leadership

Several of the women leaders explicitly stated that they believe and practice servant 
leadership, as something they have learned through their Christian beliefs or as something they 
have acquired from their cultural heritage as African women. In addition, Ms Wahu Kaara 
helped to redefine servant leadership in terms of ‘finding fulfillment in serving humanity’ in 
order to connect it explicitly with that African heritage. She felt the need to avoid the use of the 
terminology ‘servant’ because she felt that it has certain connotations for the oppressed – the 
notion of servant is not one the oppressed are comfortable ascribing to themselves. The women 
leaders illustrated several strategies of servant leadership: (a) empowerment, (b) healing, (c) 
stewardship, and (d) community building. According to these women leaders, as African women, 
their credibility in their local communities or organizational settings were dependent upon their 
constituents recognizing them as serving their needs, as meeting the felt needs of their people. 
Servant leadership connected with spirituality along the lines of being something they have 
acquired from their spiritual foundations, as well as with themes such as humility and healing.
The spirituality that these women leaders articulated and expressed is what Paris (1995) referred to as African spirituality, or what Dantley (2003) conceptualized as critical spirituality that is expressed by African-Americans in positions that necessitate prophetic leadership. In addition, as Mbiti (1969) and Paris (1995) persuasively argued, the spirituality expressed by African peoples is one where all of life is sacred: it does not dichotomize between the sacred and the profane. As such, those who utilize this spirituality as the foundation upon which their lives and leadership are built are likely to view their leadership in terms of service to humanity. In addition, they view their leadership in terms of gaining justice for their oppressed, helping to emancipate themselves and their kinfolk.

Spirituality is intricately connected with both tempered radicalism and servant leadership, but it is also distinguishable as an element by itself. For these African women leaders, spirituality serves several purposes: (a) As a source of direction for life and leadership, (b) as a source of leadership practices, and (c) as a source of strength in the midst of oppression and challenges. In these three broad themes, I found that spirituality is a source of courage to act, a divine inspiration to lead for social justice, a source of fulfillment in the face of performing thankless work, and as the impetus for action. As Ms Wahu stated, spirituality gives one the capacity to pursue the truth without illusion. Spirituality also enables these women leaders to be committed to a vision in spite of all the challenges and barriers they faced, the vision of a more just society. As such, they were willing to sacrifice their personal comforts and to go without community commendation when necessary in order to achieve that vision. In these ways, spirituality enabled these women leaders to become tempered radicals: courageous, visionary, committed social justice activists and change agents. In addition, spirituality enabled the women to become and
behave as servant leaders, because it is credited with giving them fulfillment in serving humanity. Several of them employed ‘christianese’ that is, the repertoire of words and values inherent in the Judeo-Christian tradition of which they have their early training and exposure. A few, especially Ms Anisia, Dr Abuom and Ms Wahu were better able to make the connections to their traditional belief system from their ethnic cultures. In addition, spirituality and servant leadership connected on the foundation of humility – the ability to not lord it over others but instead to put their constituents needs first.

As mentioned elsewhere, practical wisdom or critical spirituality describes the element of spirituality articulated by these African women leaders that enables them to deconstruct and reconstruct social realities – critiquing, analyzing, and redefining social constructs to make them socially just. Whether the spirituality is described in theistic terms, or in terms of values as Ms Wanyeki did, the ability to offer a profound critique of the status quo, and then to offer possible alternatives and solutions towards recreating a just society connects all these women together.

When all three elements and their defining characteristics are put together, what comes out is spirited leadership – the kind of leadership that combines servant leadership, tempered radicalism and critical spirituality in agency for social justice. The women’s identities as women, as Africans, as leaders, as Christians, and as members of particular communities combined and intersected in producing this form of spirited leadership.
Personal Resonance

This dissertation journey has been a very personal, emotional, cultural, and spiritual process for me. I have been transformed, challenged and stretched in ways I didn’t know were possible from something that is supposed to be an academic exercise. Culturally, I was forced to reconnect with a part of myself that I take for granted, and use it to my benefit and for the edification of the participants. Here I am referring to the process of conducting research as a child-researcher. I have known for a long time that curiosity that leads to learning is highly regarded in my culture, but this was the first time that I utilized that cultural knowledge to undertake a study. My relationship with the elders who participated in this study was deeply impacted by my choice to go in as a child-researcher rather than the norm in social science inquiry where the researcher is an expert. The elders/women leaders appreciated by high regard
for them, the honor and respect that I showed them by approaching them in this manner. It was partly the reason why the eldest one, Mrs. Muthoni Likimani was willing to not only participate, but also recommend and sometimes even approach on my behalf other possible participants. Similarly, Ms Wahu Kaara declined to attend an important regional meeting in order to participate in the focus group. Each woman leader that I had the privilege to converse with had to make certain sacrifices in order to make time for me, and for that I was deeply appreciative as well as touched – that I need to pay it forward in my own life.

Through my interactions with these elders, I learnt what it means to be an African woman and to lead for social justice in spite of, rather than in the absence of oppressive forces. I saw resiliency personified in each of the women, as they have chosen to take a difficult path in order to serve humanity in the form of local communities, institutions, the nation, and the continent. They were willing to suffer the consequences of their radical actions and stance, to suffer the indignities of being regarded as cultural traitors, sometimes even the comforts of a marital status in order to live out what they believed to be just and right, for themselves and for all those they attempt to help emancipate. This was a challenge to me, to realize that even though my own life has had its share of challenges and experiences of oppression because of my gender, skin color, national origins, and marital status, I have a role to play in the emancipation of my people – my people broadly defined as African peoples wherever they may be found, as well as any people who suffer the indignities of oppression due to their social identities. These women leaders illustrated for me action at the family, local, national, continental and global levels, eloquently demonstrating that one such as myself can act towards alleviating injustice from wherever I am located, starting from my own neighborhoods unto the ends of the earth, literally and figuratively. Many of these women have engaged in activism for social justice with minimal
resources, yet they have succeeded to various degrees in bringing about a more just social order, whether this is in one small location or as the agitate on global platforms. The challenge for me is to use whatever I have, to creatively and innovatively harness the resources at my disposal, including but not limited to my position in academia, my location in North America, my voice as an alien in this land, my written word, and the many avenues for speaking that come my way to agitate for social justice.

Spiritually, the women leaders challenged me to ‘put spirit in academia’, a tough nut to crack to say the least. They felt that I have a certain perspective as an African/woman/Christian/educated/youth that should be visible. They insisted that spirituality should be part of my voice in academe in any study that I engage in, any paper that I write, any teaching that I will ever undertake. They demonstrated those elements to me by telling me their stories, including how they lead when they were younger, the lessons they have learnt, the pitfalls to avoid, but most importantly, the fact that Spirit energizes, directs, propels, and should be the guiding character of my life and leadership. Should I fail to emulate these women leaders, I will have no one but myself to blame. In addition, the women decried the lack of mentors, they felt that they had struggled to lead without much direction and hoped that my own life and leadership would not be the same. That was part of the reason they insisted I bring a few of my friends to the focus group to begin mentoring relationships with them. They were intent on changing the course and direction in which they practiced personal leadership, by beginning to engage in intergenerational relationships to create a pipeline of prepared leaders who would take positions of responsibilities as those positions arose. This was the one area they felt they had not done enough and used the opportunity that this study afforded them to begin to change that. In
that sense, I felt that I had served a purpose beyond my academic achievements, a reciprocal role by bringing my friends along to begin that process.

Future Directions

I would recommend that such studies be undertaken in different locations, especially amongst those who have been historically left out of the academic debate on leadership, because such studies would provide a much-needed broader perspective to the study and practice of leadership.

In addition, studies specifically about African peoples are necessary, especially if these were conducted along the lines of celebrating diversity, learning from the ‘other’ in order to understand the self. African peoples have been misrepresented and pathologized for several hundred years, it is about time to begin to celebrate what makes them tick and how that can contribute to mainstream theory and praxis of leadership.

Perhaps my word to future researchers of African realities is that they should consider reconnecting with African culture when undertaking their studies. If there is one thing that hit home for me, it was the fact that entering the field in a culturally responsive way, writing this project in a similar fashion, avoiding as the portraiture method recommends jargon that would make this study incomprehensible to those outside the walls of leadership studies and academe; all these helped to make this journey more doable, and to communicate my writings to a broader audience. As such, I recommend for those undertaking research on African realities to consider conducting it and writing it in such a way as to be culturally responsive and to be able to communicate with the people they purport to represent. Respect and honor go a very long way in enhancing this kind of journey, and in enabling the researcher to authentically represent her participants even as she communicates with her audience.
Conclusion

Greenleaf (1977) prophesied that

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

How perspicacious of Greenleaf to foresee and foretell what was to come in the arena of leadership. The African women leaders who participated in this study are excellent examples of the dark skinned, the deprived and the alienated leading in order to serve the cause of social justice. By being spirited servant leaders and tempered radicals, these women leaders illustrated the various ways in which they have attempted to change cultures, communities, and organizations. Studies of other dark skinned, deprived and alienated women have provided similar stories of resiliency and courage in the face of struggle that is sourced from a deep well of spirituality, and a serving attitude aimed at lifting up their constituents (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Dove, 1998; Jones, 2003; Murtadha-Watts, 1999; Reid-Merritt, 1996). The dark skinned, deprived and alienated in this study and from the authors just cited have a collective mentality, a social consciousness bred from their Africana culture and their positionality in communities of people who have historically endured much oppression. Their spirituality and social consciousness make the women leaders toughened and wizened fighters for socially just causes. They pay a high price for their activism, yet continue to speak out, stand up and shout when necessary to bring about much needed changes. The African women leaders whose stories illuminate our understanding of leadership in this study thus join their sisters in North America and other places who are struggling to bring about social justice in its various manifestations.
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APPENDIX A

CONSENT LETTER

Bowling Green State University
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Nairobi Contacts:
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Research Title: Portraits of African Women Leaders

Date

Dear: (Insert Name Here)

My name is Faith Wambura Ngunjiri, and I am a doctoral student in the Education Administration and Leadership Studies program at Bowling Green State University (USA). You are invited to participate in a research study on African Women’s leadership experiences that I am conducting as part of my doctoral dissertation requirements. The purpose of my study is to explore the experiences of African women leaders with a view to writing stories about them that will help explain how women in Kenya succeed as leaders. My studies in the USA have brought me to the conclusion that very little is known about African women, and that which is available is not about their leadership roles. Instead, much of what I have found has explored our experiences of suffering under the weight of HIV/AIDS, early marriages, lack of education, lack of access to resources and other African realities. Instead, I would like to show how African women manage to thrive as leaders in spite of all the challenges that they face, and contribute to the understanding of women’s leadership by providing a distinctively African perspective. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.
I would like to provide you with more information about how I will conduct this study. Your participation will involve

1. filling in a biographical questionnaire,
2. three conversations,
3. two observations of you in your daily work activities,
4. a two to three hour focus group, and
5. You can share with me any materials that would help me in understanding your leadership experiences such as photographs, news articles, books, dairy entries, poems, songs, etc.

These activities will all take place between June and September 2005.

Biographical questionnaire: I have brought the conversational questionnaire with me for this initial meeting, along with this consent letter and form. The biographical questionnaire will provide a beginning point for our next conversation, and should take 20-30 minutes to complete. It contains a series of open-ended statements and questions for you to reflect upon and answer. I will pick it up along with the consent form during our next meeting.

Conversations: we will have three conversations lasting about 2 hours each, in which you will have the opportunity to respond to a series of questions regarding your life and leadership experiences. With your permission, each of these conversations will be audio taped. The purpose of audio taping is to ensure that I will accurately record our conversation. These recordings will be transcribed by my assistant, who will be requested to keep that information confidential and I will provide you with the transcript to verify accuracy. Should you be uncomfortable with audio taping, I will write notes during our conversations. However, to ensure that I am able to concentrate on our conversation, I would request your permission to have my research assistant along to record our conversation. She will type up her shorthand notes of our conversation and I will provide you with a copy to verify the accuracy of our record. With your permission, I will include excerpts from the conversations in my dissertation. All the tapes, notes, and information will be locked up in a file cabinet in my Nairobi office, and when I return to the US, I will again keep the materials locked up in my Bowling Green State University Office, and no one besides me will have access to that data. I will retain the information for the next 5 years.

Participant observation: in order to better understand your work, life and leadership experiences, I would like to observe you at work for at least two days. My role will be strictly as an observer. You may choose the times that would be most appropriate for me to conduct those observations. You are free to participate in the study without these observations. During my observations, I will take notes which I will type up and give you a copy to verify the accuracy of my interpretations of your experiences. These typed notes will be locked up in a file cabinet in my office, and no one besides me will have access to them. I will retain them for the next 5 years.

Focus group: the final event requiring your participation will be a group activity or focus group, where you will meet all the other participants for this study. You will be asked to hold the focus discussions in confidence. With your permission, this session will be audio and video taped. The audio tapes will be transcribed, and the video tapes will help me in analyzing and capturing all the comments that were made and that these comments were made. With your permission, excerpts from the focus group will be included in my dissertation. All the audio and video tapes,
notes and information will be kept confidential and locked up in a file cabinet in my office, and I will retain that information for 5 years. You may choose to participate in the study without participating in the focus group.

You will have the chance to review transcripts of all our conversations and focus group. My dissertation will be read by my four committee members in the USA, and will be available to the public in its final form. Segments of the dissertation will also be used in educational publications and presentations in the USA. After I complete the dissertation, I will present you with a complimentary copy.

At the end of each of our meetings and conversations, as well as at the focus group, I will ask you if there are additional materials that you would be willing to share with me that would further enhance my understanding of your life and leadership. Such materials may include journal entries, diaries, articles written about you in the press, articles and books you have written, pictures, etc. You may choose to participate in the study without contributing any such materials.

We will strive to maintain measures of confidentiality throughout the course of this research study. You are invited to come up with a name (a pseudonym) that we can use during this study that reflects who you are without naming you directly. That pseudonym will be used in all phases of the research, in all the records, and in all drafts of my dissertation. Your identity will not be revealed in any published form, unless you specifically request that I use your real name.

My dissertation chair, Dr. Judy Alston will have access to the transcripts and observation notes as my advisor for this project. One fellow graduate student in the doctoral program will serve as a peer reviewer for this study and will also have access to interview transcripts and observation notes for a limited time.

The anticipated risks to you are no greater than those normally encountered in daily life.

This study will be beneficial to African women aspiring to leadership, as they may be inspired by reading about your leadership experiences and how you have navigated the challenges to your authority successfully. The study is also of benefit to you and all the other participants, as a chance to reflect on your life and leadership experiences, and to take stock of the people, places and events that have been significant in your leadership journey. Other women beyond Kenya who may be experiencing similar challenges may also benefit from reading about the methods you have employed and the strategies that have worked for your success. Younger women aspiring to leadership may also benefit from the example that you provide, and having it in this written format will make it possible to have a wider audience. I will benefit both personally and professionally by learning from the example that you provide through your leadership experiences, and your willingness to allow me into your lived world.

Once again, your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without penalty.
If you have any questions regarding this study, you can contact me at 4450689 (H) or 0722-469815 (mobile), or email (faithn@bgnet.bgsu.edu). You may also contact my advisor Dr. Judy Alston on email (jalston@bgnet.bgsu.edu). You can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Board at Bowling Green State University on email (hsrb@bgnet.bgsu.edu) if you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant.

If you agree to participate in the study, please sign the attached consent form, and complete the biographical questionnaire, both of which I will pick up from your office at a date we will agree on today.

I hope you will take part in this study, and that you will enjoy the chance to reflect alone, as well as in a group with other women leaders. I look forward to our first conversation and consequent journey together.

Sincerely,

Faith Wambura Ngunjiri
APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

Bowling Green State University
School of Leadership and Policy Studies

Principal Investigator: Faith Wambura Ngunjiri
USA Address: 514 Education Building, Bowling Green, Ohio 43403.
Nairobi Address: P O Box 57051 Nairobi
Tel: 4450689 (h)
Tel: 0722-469815 (mobile)
Email: faithn@bgnet.bgsu.edu

Research Title: Portraits of African Women Leaders

I have been informed about the procedures for participation in this study as detailed in the cover letter/consent form.

YES: ____________________________ (please initial)

I am willing to participate in the research study entitled Portraits of African Women Leaders
YES ____________________________ (please initial)

I would like the researcher to use my Real Name (Provide Real Name as you want it to appear)
YES/NO______________________________________________________________

If NO, I would like the researcher to use this pseudonym_____________________________________________________________

Participants Name ________________________________________________________

Participant Signature ______________________________________________________

Date __________________________________

PLEASE SIGN AND DATE BOTH COPIES OF THIS INFORMED CONSENT FORM. RETURN ONE COPY TO ME, AND KEEP THE OTHER COPY FOR YOUR RECORDS.

Faith Wambura Ngunjiri
APPENDIX C

BIOGRAPHICAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Principal investigator: Faith Wambura Ngunjiri
514 education building
Bowling Green Oh 43403
Office:
Cell: (put Kenya Cell number here)
Home (Nairobi – 4450689)

Research Title: Portraits of African women leaders

Purpose: The reason that I am requesting you to fill in this questionnaire is to give us a background to begin our conversations about your life and leadership experiences. Please include Curriculum Vitae (CV) with this questionnaire. If the CV contains the information requested for below, please state ‘see CV’ after the corresponding question.

1. What is your full name? (If you are published by any other names, please list those names as well).

2. What is your current job title?
   a. Please provide a brief job description
   b. In what year did you begin at your current position?

3. List previous positions held within this organization, if any.

4. List previous positions held in other organizations.

5. What was your first leadership position?

6. List your professional and educational background including memberships in professional, community and other organizations.

7. List for me the schools and colleges you have attended.
APPENDIX D

CONVERSATION PROBES

Conversation one
Tell me about your life as a leader
1. what is the context of leadership
2. what roles do you play
3. tell me about your best experiences or success stories
4. What struggles have you faced? How have you dealt with them?
5. How would you describe yourself as a leader?
6. Would you describe yourself as a radical? How?
7. Would you describe yourself as a servant? How? Are there any stories from your leadership experiences that illustrate this?
8. Where do you find your source of strength?
9. How do you manage the various roles that you play? (for example as wife, mother, daughter, community member, church member, women’s leader, organizational leader, etc)
10. What else would you like to share with me about your life as a leader? What experiences would you say have been most profound for you?

Conversation two
Tell me about your life before leadership, your life story.
1. Where did you grow up
2. Who were your parents?
3. What were their views about girls and education
4. What roles did you play within the family
5. What kind of schools did you attend? Did you have any leadership experiences there, such as being a prefect, or club chair, etc?
6. Who are the people who influenced your educational choices?
7. How did you choose your career? What kind of Career path have you had? Who are the people who have influenced your career path?
8. How involved were you in the church?
9. Has spirituality impact your life and leadership? How?
10. What else can you tell me about your life prior to your current leadership position?

Conversation three – follow up
Tell me about your future as a leader
1. Where do you see yourself in the next five or ten years?
2. What do you need to do now to get there?
3. What challenges do you expect to have to face?
4. How do you intend to face such challenges?
5. What lessons have you learnt from your past leadership experiences that will aid you in your future as a leader?
6. Do you mentor any young women? How?
7. Is there anything else you would want to share with me about your past, present or future as a leader?
APPENDIX E

FOCUS GROUP PROBES

Lessons learned

Handling cultural constraints

Leadership is dominated by men

Wearing many hats – family roles, church roles, community roles, organizational roles, etc

Women are their own worst enemies – or are they?

Mentoring younger women

Servant leadership

Words of wisdom to emerging women leaders