Chapter 7
African Women in Leadership:
Lessons From the LEAD Research Project

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers African women's participation in leadership and their views on effective leadership. The literature suggests that African women remain underrepresented in leadership roles, although participation rates are increasing. African women are well represented as entrepreneurs, in the less profitable informal sector, and are increasingly found in political spheres. The LEAD research shows men and women holding similar views regarding effective leadership. Preliminary results suggest that traditional views about leadership, which held women back, may be changing. This is a positive development, as society will benefit from the leadership skills of women. Efforts by African governments to mandate percentages of women in leadership positions may have an effect on government as well as business. Africa, however, is a large continent with parts of its population residing in rural areas where traditions continue. Consequently, more research is needed to understand developments regarding the involvement of women in leadership to inform policy and influence practice.

INTRODUCTION

Given the increasing importance of African countries in the international business environment (WEF, 2015; UNCTAD, 2015), this chapter examines how African women have fared in leadership in the African context. We focus on the leadership of African women because there is limited understanding of how African women practice leadership. This is crucial for informing efforts aimed at improving practice as well as integrating women into leadership positions.

Despite recent developments where the number of women in leadership positions has increased globally, women remain underrepresented in leadership (de la Rey, 2005). This is of concern for managers and researchers around the world, not just in Africa. According to Punnett (2015), quite a lot is known about the role of women and the challenges they encounter in the workplace; however, less is known about the leadership of women in specific regions of the world including Africa. This chapter examines women and leadership in Africa. The literature on African women in leadership is first reviewed followed by a discussion on the initiatives to increase the participation of women in leadership positions in Africa. The findings of the LEAD research project on women in leadership in Africa are then highlighted. Finally, future research directions and recommendations are provided on how to increase the participation of women in leadership in Africa.

The focus of the chapter is broadly on Africa. It is important to note, at the outset, that Africa is a very large region, consisting of a large number of countries, and there are many variations across the continent – for example there are cultural, ethnic, political, religious, and tribal differences that all can have an impact on the role of women, and women in leadership roles. To the extent possible, where there are contrasts in findings from different countries or regions, these are noted in discussing such findings. In addition, information on specific countries is presented as well as information that more generally relates to Africa as a whole.

It is relatively common in the literature to find the African continent divided into Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) versus the rest of Africa, and North Africa is often classified with countries of the Middle East. It is also relatively common to find discussions of North Africa, Southern Africa, West Africa, and East Africa, as separate and distinguishable regions. Further the country of South Africa has been examined in terms of color; white South Africa versus black South Africa, with white South Africa being classified with Anglo countries.

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