# Challenges in the Participation of Professional Women in Leadership: A Case Study of the East African Community

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**Abstract:** *Though there are so many educated and professional women in East Africa, their participation in senior leadership positions has been and continues to be below expectations. There is no doubt that women constitute a major portion of the working force in various sectors of the economy, hence the need for their mainstreaming in senior leadership. The East African Community is a creation of the five countries of Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi. Though the Community was created almost a decade ago, there are very few women in senior leadership positions. The purpose of the study was to identify and assess key challenges that women face in leadership within the East African Community. The study adopted a case study research design covering a stratified random sample of 30 respondents comprising both female and male staff within the Community based in Arusha, Tanzania. The study was purely qualitative in nature and data was collected through key informant interviews. The collected data was analyzed through content analysis through creation of appropriate themes as guided by the research objectives. The findings show that there is a big gender gap between men and professional staff in leadership positions at the Community, with majority women being in middle level positions categorized as general staff. It is evident that more men than women aspire or are given preference in senior leaders. Based on the study findings, there is need for affirmative action on developing women leadership within the Community. Community policy makers should focus on the women midlevel managers for development and growth into higher positions in leadership. Further, special opportunities should be created that can encourage them to accelerate their professional growth to the top. Lastly, as part of the affirmative action the Community should stress in its job advertisements for women to apply for professional leadership positions.*

**Keywords:** Affirmative action, East African Community, Leadership, Participation, Professional women

## 1. Introduction

The East African Community (EAC) is a regional inter-governmental organization mandated by the governments of Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, Burundi, the United Republic of Tanzaniato spear head the East African economic, social and political integration agenda. The Treaty for the Establishment of the East African Community was signed in November 1999 and entered into force in July 2000.The research being undertaken focuses on the three main organs of the East African Community, namely East African Legislative Assembly, the East African Court of Justice, and the East African Community Secretariat. The EAC has eight institutions; namely East African Development Bank (EADB), Lake Victoria Basin Commission (LVBC), Inter University Council for East Africa (IUCEA), East African Health Research Commission (EAHRC), Civil Aviation Safety and Security Agency (CASSOA), East African Science and Technology Commission(EASTCO), Lake Victoria Fisheries Organization (LVFO) and East African Kiswahili Commission(EAKCO).

In the study of EAC Strategy for mainstreaming Gender in the EAC structures, Organs and Institutions (2013), a quick review of the EAC institutions revealed that, the values espoused in the Treaty, seem to be inclusive and gender responsive. However, operationally the culture ofgender responsiveness calls for more proactive strategies at different levels of EAC. For example, it was observed that, women constitute a small minority in most of the strategic leadership positions of the EAC, including the EAC Secretariat, Partner States, institutions and governance structures.

Furthermore, from interviews conducted with a cross section of individuals within the EAC Secretariat and the focal ministries in partner states, there was a feeling particularly from the lower cadre staff that the line of communication within EAC tends to be too vertical. They tend to view this as a situation that needs to be transformed as it was leaving out a significant number of staff from key processes, including information sharing, training, and social events. There seems to be a feeling among the women and men staff that relationships are based on a hierarchical vertical relationship; an aspect which poses as a challenge to mainstreaming a cross-cutting issue such as gender even if all other factors like human resource and finances were to be under control. There are systemic and legal impediments to women political participation that have persisted at all levels and in various facets including among others culture and patriarchy, lack of financial resources, balancing family with professional responsibility, as well as inadequate support from ones party in case of those in political leadership. For instance, Rwanda, one of the Partner States that claims to have made great strides in gender equality apparently has very few professional women at the three organs of the Community. For instance, in the EACJ, there is only one woman in a leadership position from Uganda. Chamley (2011) notes that many African governments including those of East Africa offer little or no support to women who wish to pursue political leadership in their governments. Consequently, very few women have made it to those positions when it comes to government and political participation. This has not spared the East African Community which is an amalgamation of five states.

Also another factor that is a challenge to professional women taking up higher positions in an organization is the

fact that the younger women do not have senior women as mentors to pass on skills and motivate them as compared to men. Further, there is no consideration to the gender sensitivity in structures. So, most male mentors cannot possibly mentor the next women professional leaders without valuing the female employees' way of life. Hanson (2008) opines that many people prefer to have mentors of the same gender because they tend to understand the challenges most commonly faced.For a long time, women have been sidelined from participating in the structures of governance that determine political and legislative priorities (IPU, 2008).

## 2. Research Methods

The study was purely qualitative adopting a case study research design. Data collection involved key informant interviews with both female and male employees within the East African Community based in Arusha Tanzania. The study covered a stratified simple random sample of 30 respondents, with majority being female. To help achieve a representative sample for purpose of generalizations, the respondents were drawn from professional women staff in the three organs of the Community, namely the East African Legislative Assembly, the Secretariat and the East African Court of Justice. The data collection involved face-to-face interviews followed with classification of the collected data into appropriate themes as guided by the research objectives. These involved identification, categorization and fitting of data into themes in order to create meaning in answering the research questions. Data collection was done by the researcher in which respondents gave verbatim accounts on the issue under study.

## 3. Results and Analysis

There were nine subthemes that emerged out of the first objective. The objectives sought to find out the contribution of profession women leaders in East African Community headquarters. It was of great importance to find out the women leaders contribution at EAC and then compared to men. In most cases women contributions are sometimes neglected and unseen. From this theme, nine subthemes emerged namely; carrying out different tasks - technical, social and political, oversight roles, leadership positions, participation, governance reforms, procurement plans and advisory, equal participation and women are more committed.

The findings show that a number of women are heads of departments while only two women headsDirectorates. EAC holds the policy of non-discrimination whereby recruitment and promotions are based purely on merit; qualified women Leaders at all levels have contributed to the mission of the EAC which is to widen and deepen economic, political, social and cultural integration in order to improve the life of the people of East Africa through increased competitiveness, value added production, trade and investment. In support of this viewpoint, R5 said that,*"EAC's goal is integration at various levels, looking at variousstrides made on integration (Political Federation) for example at the time Beatrice Kiraso (Hon) was at EAC, I would say women have done a lot".*

Women contribution at EAC is really limited to those in leadership, who are indeed very few at EAC. Wherever they are however, the departments, projects and organs have thrived, have realized a sense of order, a sense of fairness, achievement and progress of the dockets they *handle. To emphasize this point one of the respondents (R17) asserted that "The contribution of women leaders at the EAC organs has been technical, social, and Political. On the one hand you will see a lady Deputy Secretary General, a political appointee taking on an executive role, and the Principal Judge, taking on an administrative and judicial role to the technical project manager of the financial sector development Project and the Human Resource officer".*

The study revealed that women are engaged in oversight roles in the EALA and engaged in all activities in the August house; move motions and debates and also two chairpersons of Committees are women. They do participate in equal footing with the men in all activities of the organs and institutions of EAC.

Many women in the professional positions also contribute positively to the organs where they are placed and their dedication, eye for detail as well as ability to provide a caring heart. Apart from the few who have been placed in the leadership positions, participation is limited to the dockets in which different people are placed.Respondent (R5) noted that *"in EALA women Members of Parliament arevery active. Many timesthey have moved motions that have taken EALA to another level.*

However, as revealed by the study, there are very many women employed in the three organs of the Community and they participate in Community activities and operations without discrimination. Regarding contributions and debates in the respective organs and institutions, indeed the track record of women leadership is very rich in the offices. On women's participation as employees, one respondent (R11) noted that *"Women have done well just like maleemployees. They have exhibited professionalism in their positions just like men though they face challenges when they leave their children and partners home in their different respective Partner States. They have to incur costs of phone calling or regular air tickets to keep in touch with their families; this sometimes affects their performance. Where they are employed, they do participate in decision making and implementation of activities".*

Regarding governance reforms, the study discovered that women have upheld the Vision of the Community which is "Promote a prosperous, competitive, secure, stable and politically united East African; and implemented the stated Mission. The East African Community like other international organizations is governed on the basis of strategic priorities which stipulate the vision and mission with their respective priority interventions.

In a similar vein of advocating for good governance, the Principal Judge of EACJ (R8) stated that; *"Iadvocated for, championed and managed to generate consensus on the need for governance reforms and structures in the EACJ.*

*The Court plenary, comprised of all the judges of the Court, did finally concede to the proposal reforms and they are reflected in a Draft Bill of the Administration of the EACJ. Facilitating the integration process of the five countries through administrative support to decision and policy making, information sharing with the relevant stakeholders on the EAC pillars of integration is one of the main contributions of women in their respective organs. Women have also helped in putting up legal and regulatory frameworks, including development of legal instruments of the Customs department".*

Another important contribution of women as revealed through the study is the implementation of equal opportunities in all aspects; they have helped in implementing the EAC procurement plans and advisory on the professional decisions. The contribution of women is equal to that of men in the implementation of the EAC activities since both equally participate and take up similar roles and responsibilities as the EAC organs strive to meet their mandates.

This study discovered that women are more committed than men, always available if there is a programme to be undertaken, they always make a follow-up on issues and are trusted but reproductive roles tend to hamper their contributions because of children bearing, attending to the sick members of their families and other marital issues which were identified as major impediments to their participation in leadership.

## 4. Conclusion

Acritical analysis of the study findings clearly shows that participation of professional women in leadership at the East African Community is inadequate. The study concludes that the inadequate participation is affected by both internal and external challenges. From the study findings, it is also clear that the Community does not have deliberate programmes to mainstream women in senior leadership positions as many of them are concentrated in the middle level cadre. It was evident from the study findings that though there are no many women in senior leadership positions, their contributions as employees are immense in all activities and operations of the Community. It was also evident that women are more committed to their assignments than men; always available if there is a programme to be undertaken, they always make a follow-up on issues and are trusted. However, their reproductive roles tend to hamper their contributions because of children bearing, attending to the sick members of their families and other marital issues which were identified as major impediments to their participation in leadership.

## 5. Recommendations

Based on the research findings and challenges identified thereof, the study recommendations a number of measures to improve participation of professional women in leadership in the East African Community.

The East African policy makers should formulate and implement an affirmative action to help mainstream women into senior leadership in the Community. Secondly, the Community should develop an appropriate capacity building programme to support women rise into higher leadership positions. The Community should also establish a special fund to assist women employees acquire higher qualifications that can enable them ascend to higher leadership positions. The focus should be on the mid-level managers, the majority of whom are women.

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