Ways of Seeing Women’s Leadership in Education

Metaphors and Images in stories of Rwandan and Bangladeshi Women Leaders

Women Leading Education across the Continents

7th International Conference
July 8 – 11 2019
University of Nottingham, Nottingham, United Kingdom

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Strong hearts, strong minds, strong women
Examples of Leadership Metaphors from the Literature

- War and fighting metaphors – developing a battle plan, winning or losing, surviving, danger
- Game and sport metaphors – playing the game, team spirit, breaking rules, competitiveness
- Art metaphors - acting and performing metaphors – conducting an orchestra
- Machine metaphors – requiring maintenance, toolbox, operate and control
- Religious/spiritual metaphors- spreading hope, values, beliefs, inspiration,

(Thomas Oberlechner and Viktor Mayer-Schönberger, 2002, Through Their Own Words, Working Papers, Centre for Public Leadership)
Metaphors about Women’s Leadership

- **Glass ceiling** - implies that women face obstacles once they have risen to very high levels of leadership.

- **Glass cliff** – implies that women are more likely to occupy risky or precarious leadership roles than are men. Once the glass ceiling is shattered, there is no guarantee that a woman leader won’t step or be pushed off the glass cliff.

- **Sticky floors** - implies that women are prevented from any advancement beyond entry level.

- **Labarynth** - reflects the myriad obstacles that women face throughout their careers.

(Linda L Carli and Alice H Eagly, 2016, Women Face a Labyrinth: An examination of metaphors for women leaders, Gender in Management 31 No. 8, pp. 514-527)
This paper is developed from qualitative data exploring the metaphors and images used to describe leadership in two different cultural contexts – in Africa and Asia.

I wanted to see if the understanding of women’s leadership as expressed in metaphors is contextualized differently across the continents.

Ten women I knew from experience to be exceptional leaders in Rwanda and Bangladesh were approached to write their life stories, elaborate on their experience of leadership, and provide a metaphor for their leadership style.

Four Rwandans, two living abroad and two in Kigali, and two Bangladeshis, both living in Dhaka but having also lived abroad responded.
Rosette

- I grew up as a refugee girl in Nairobi, Kenya.
- I was born to an unwed mother, in a foreign land in a refugee situation.
- She herself was a witness and survivor.
- As soon as I was born, the odds were seemingly stacked against me.
- My childhood, was far from stable. As Tutsis we had no right of return so my mother could not go back to Rwanda, did not have any protections or provisions.
- This made it necessary for us to keep moving from place to place looking for food and shelter and family – by age nine I had crossed two international borders and been to six schools (roughly a new school every year).

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Justine

- I was born in Kigali, however, as a baby I left Rwanda when my mother fled to seek refuge in Uganda.
- I spent the first six years of childhood living there in Mbarara Rwandans’ Refugee Camp.
- Education was challenge - most times I depended on borrowed school notes from friends who attended better schools to prepare for national exams.
- I returned to Rwanda as a young adult on 11 August 1994 after the genocide against the Rwandan Tutsi and with the hope of finding my father alive.
- But, I found only an empty compound and learned that my father, along with his two wives and their children (save for one), had been killed.
Rosette
• Home was not a place of refuge so I found refuge in school. There was constant hunger in my stomach but I filled my mind with books

• I was ferocious – so hungry for education I was – that by age ten, I could speak six languages fluently

• Of the refugee children who did the national examination at the end of primary school in 1979, I was third in the country, passing with three As

• Four years later, I made it to A levels. At that time in Kenya, passing the A levels was that critical stepping stone to University

• That little girl who started primary school in Kampala that many years ago did not give up

• Through elementary, high school, three bachelor degrees, two master degrees and a doctorate, I am aware I beat tremendous odds and persisted over many obstacles

Justine
• I would like to see more solidarity / sisterhood among women leaders

• We women should know that women have distinct life experiences, needs and opportunities

• Unless we consider exclusion and inclusion amongst ourselves, we are merely emulating the same system that discriminates against us – the male-stream

• We also need to rigorously mentor young generations of women, whilst also raising our sons to become gender-sensitive and women-respecting men

• Three of the key images relating to my empowerment and experience as a resilient leader are
  - “Educate a woman, and you educate a nation”,
  - "Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn"
  - “When the going gets tough, the tough get going”
To find a metaphor to describe my educational leadership journey turned out to be a more difficult exercise than was anticipated.

I consider myself an amateur gardener, as a hobby. I enjoy seeding, planting, tending and watching beautiful and delicious things grow from the ground.

I did not grow up a gardener, nor the child of gardener.

After much reflection I have thought of a plant—a dandelion—a weed to most and a flower to some.

Like the persistent dandelion, I learned to adapt to my new environment and to set down roots. I found something I was good at—a level playing field.

No matter what side you fall on the weed/flower dichotomy, we all reckon with the persistence of the dandelion.

After contemplating a few metaphors, I settled on a camel’s life: an animal which mirrors my resilience, patience and life experience.

Camels are survivors against all odds: through bad weather, famine, and drought, they humbly serve to the last minute.

Camels have fat in their humps that help them endure hunger longer than other animals.

My life experiences have taken me through so many life challenges at different degrees that the kicks turn out to become my strength to overcome the next challenge.

What is more, my life experiences gave (practical) lens for seeing vulnerability easily; the power to effect change with no fear, a hallmark to my professional choices, my relationships with the vulnerable, and a source of stamina for persistence and grace.

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The dandelion is known for its persistence and adaptability. In the US and Canada, season after season, lawn after lawn, the dandelion shows up again and again, setting down deep roots and reproducing itself in neighboring lawns. By turning its pretty little flower into puffballs, whose seeds are blown by the wind (or children) into the next place where new dandelions set down roots and bloom and the cycle continues. Dandelions are also known to repel destructive worms while attracting honey bees and to support plants with weaker roots. This may be why some ‘naturalist’ gardeners do not seem to mind them so much.

Like a camel - which drinks a lot of water in one go and can survive on it for quite some time - when I am given an opportunity for learning (or imparting knowledge) I drink it in and as fast as I can! This is because my own opportunity to undertake education was not a given; education was something I struggled and worked so very hard to achieve.

Life to me is nothing else but service, social justice, fairness, activism, helping and mentoring others, and withstanding distractions is at the center of my life. I know that life is nothing but having people who matter in my life, people that can inspire and improve my life to also improve the lives of those around me.

“A weed is a plant that has mastered every survival skill except for learning how to grow in rows.” ~Doug Larson
Dimitrie

Colette

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Sissi Dimitrie

- Born in 1972 in Kigali and had six siblings; three sisters and three brothers. I was the sixth of the seven children.
- I studied eight years of primary school and completed them with a very high aggregate top ranking score, outstandingly passing the secondary school entry test.
- Nevertheless, because of the ethnic discrimination against Tutsis in the education system, I was denied the sciences course I wanted to do in high school so opted for social studies.
- Before the last term of high school the genocide against the Tutsi in 1994 was the most horrible experience of my life.
- Every single part of life in Rwanda closed down, and all my family members were killed.

Colette Nyinawumuntu

- Born in Kampala Uganda in 1987 where parents had gone as refugees.
- I remember, before we would walk a long distance to go to school barefooted, we used to wake up early, fetch water, find firewood, and make sure home chores were done, then go to school.
- When I joined science, my friends in the village would laugh at me, saying that I took a male character because I was born with boys, “How could you do science when you’re a girl? You will fail.”
- I would feel bad whenever I met women from farms carrying babies on their backs with hoes in their hands and firewood on their heads; the husbands were in bars enjoying the harvest’s money taken without women’s consent.
Sissi Dimitrie

- Raised young genocide orphans and has five of her own children
- For my parents, going to school and earning a degree meant successful, independent and happy life.
- Today I am a holder of two master’s degrees, aiming for a PhD
- A senior trainer for public servants in many disciplines
- I strongly believe in women’s empowerment and the need for mutual support to handle the issues women face
- I prefer leading by mentoring, coaching and having good examples to inspire and influence the best results from my teams
- I am part of formal mentorship program for girls, mentoring 5 young graduates in past 3 years. I meet my mentors regularly to exchange views on different topics and issues: connection, roles

Colette Nyinawumuntu

- My life is not a bed of roses
- When I moved from agriculture to gender I was a bit nervous as at first I could not figure out how to combine my formal knowledge and work, but as I loved what I was doing, I found the way to excel
- Because it was my passion, I created my learning environment and I would attend meetings, ask questions, engage in conversation and follow speeches of outstanding women
- I wanted to be in touch with girls, to walk their way so that I could really understand the different lives they lived and the needs they have to be successful in life
- My husband is the backbone of every success I have
- Having a supportive partner or finding a helping hand from family and friends

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Sissi Dimitrie

Metaphor to Describe my Leadership

- Going back through my life experience, that one thing really describing my life is “resilience”
- And that spirit of never giving up on my dreams even if I see a lot of barriers and obstacles on my way
- After analysing a few metaphors, I think I am more like a “Hedera Helix”, as a flowering plant
- It is also called English Ivy and you can find it in almost all areas of the world
- English ivy is evergreen, very tolerant of shade and will grow in full sun
- In the adult or reproductive phase, English ivy produces a woody erect stem either from the ground or growing off existing climbing vines

Colette Nyinawumuntu

- Whenever I think of empowerment, resilience and leadership I value self-confidence
- Even when my husband is encouraging me, he reminds me of who I am, to keep going
- I like the picture of a cat looking in a mirror, with a tiger reflecting back
- What you think of yourself is more important than what you think others think of you
- “No one can make you feel inferior without your permission” ~ Eleanor Roosevelt. I am not saying what others think about you should not be valued
- But if I had followed other people’s understanding about girls cannot do science about how managing school, work and home is a difficulty I would have given up. I kept thinking of the glory ahead of me and pushed myself beyond what others thought

11 July, 2019
Sissi Dimitrie

- Its **tolerance** to changes makes it very resilient.
- It can take multiple forms, can be used for different purposes including ornamental and medicine.
- It can be planted indoor or outdoor, and lives long because it **resists** weather and all sorts of **turbulences**.
- I found myself adjusting and adapting to many situations, bad or good, but I can’t give up on my dreams and goals.

Colette Nyinawumuntu

- A professional internship served as **my pathway** to work with women and girls.
- It helped me to **navigate** through various challenges women and girls face in terms of economy.
- This process takes a person on a **journey** of change and it can be applied in every area if we want to change the mindsets of women and girls towards social norms and behaviours.
- My husband would give me a hand and indeed made me do things that I couldn’t have thought I could do.
- My mentor gave me various opportunities to **shine**.
- Do not settle for what you have; there are many selves within you **untapped**.

11 July, 2019
Baby Karmakar

- My schools-primary, secondary and higher secondary were dominated by strong and single women, passionate in their work as teachers and educationists, nurturers of high discipline and boldness, fostered team spirit

- The importance of critical thinking was deliberately infused into our everyday thinking at the University of Melbourne and opened a flood gate of confidence in me to deal with any complex issues and challenges in my work

- Teacher of English as a Second Language and in Administration Academy on Communicative English, Change Management, Public Policy Making

- Senior diplomat in Japan, and public servant developing new work field out of scratch

- Artist, professional singer on national television and radio

Tajkera Khair

- My father was a founder principal of school and mother was a housewife whom I hardly knew because she died when I was a one-year-old infant

- We were eight sisters and four brothers from three different mothers

- My father married for the third time when both my mother and stepmother died at a young age

- I lost my father at the age of 12. My eldest brother Shafiqur Rahman and sister-in-law Jahanara Begum raised me from my early childhood

- I had only two dresses for a long time; one was a school dress and the other was an ordinary dress for daily use
Baby Karmakar

- My personality and perspective of the world was shaped by my grandmother and my mother in my childhood.
- My grandmother was a lover of nature. Planting trees in all seasons was her hobby.
- She knew how to love and raise them as if they were her children.
- If it was decided that one firewood tree would be trimmed for firewood, she would leave the house during the trimming.
- She felt pain looking at chopped-off branches from the trees.
- She loved birds and animals in her neighborhood.
- The mantra of attachment with nature has been transmitted from her to me and I still carry a deep attachment to nature and the environment.

Tajkera Khair

- Married at the age of 14 and moved back to her in-laws’ place.
- Her husband was a famous doctor and the first acupuncturist in Bangladesh who opened the door of Pandora of knowledge to me - BSc, two masters.
- I raised my voice to give reproductive health and hygiene education to girls from primary school to college level.
- My mentor has this magnificent quality to inspire women positively and give them strengths to straighten their backbone in developing a country like Bangladesh.
- She is a true leader and she is still holding the beacon from Australia that we still get energized to work at this age too.
- We cannot enlighten any nation without concentrating on the nuclear cells of it - which is a family. We are intervening in empowering every family member.
Baby Karmakar

- I would like to go back to my grandmother’s love for trees. I consider myself as a tree.
- My roots are my confidence that I have developed by learning and experiencing and sharing and being bold in my work.
- My branches are the shades of trust that people can trust and rely on.
- I never give up, like big trees, and that is my resilience. It is developed through my keen interest in understanding any situations to decide what my role should be.

Tajkera Khair

- My surrounding people say I am like a Rhino.
- My resilience capacity to absorb every discouraging words I had to face in the past and move forward with my extra-thick layer of skin to develop our women in need.
- My husband used to say I have skin like a Rhino’s thick skin.
- Without being a Rhino I would not be able to work in the women development sector in Bangladesh.
Baby Karmikar

- I never give up. My strong belief is that even if I cannot go to the goal, something new will be discovered, new process, new learning for a new path.
- Life must continue for positive reasons in any way. It is my knowledge and positive attitude to involve myself in situations that represents my leadership among others.
- My networking and exploring information and processing skills help me come up with different perspectives from the others.
- And I try to link with the development activities of any programme with whatever experiences I have gather in the past and connect them to the new projects and programme to add value.
- Knowledge, attitude and networking skills are important for a civil servant to address any situations with prudence.

Tajkera Khair

- My strength is patience, like a turtle.
- I had to empower so patiently to convince the first batch of 11 women (1 center director and 10 social workers) from the remote village in Noakhali to bring them to Dhaka city for training on Women’s Development during 1977-80.
- I had to deal with patience and at the end I won the challenge.
- I think I have a brain like flamingos in terms of leadership.
- I trained my team - my flock how to walk even in between the salty lake of life.
- and overcome all the obstacles.
Findings

• Metaphors provide a stimulating way to understand leadership and what women really mean when discussing leadership.

• The analysis of leadership stories shows that leaders simultaneously use many metaphors, and that these are determined by a dynamic interplay of personal, situational, and cultural factors.

• Leadership metaphors carry messages about the ethics of leadership, suggesting what is good, what should be done, and how. Being aware of these messages is an important basis for ethical leadership.

• Is there a gender gap? Can leadership be gendered?