

Creating Young Female Leaders for the Future

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It is estimated that youth form 70 percent of Nigeria's population and make up a powerful majority of the electorate at 65 percent. Thus, Nigeria with a population of almost 170 million is predominantly a youthful population. A greater percentage of this youthful population is female.

We live in a time of dynamic change in Nigeria. These young women are watching the current trends in the political, social and economical arenas of our country and are demanding accountability from our leaders, vocally and openly without fear of repercussions. These young women have equally moved from the level of hiding behind the scenes to being aware of their potential in terms of gender equality and equity.

To be able to march into the future as young leaders for the next generation however, they must act as one with a clear sense of what is important, putting forth efforts to improve and create things that will make a difference, with a high sense of commitment to community and the nation, possess positive qualities like compassion, fearlessness and good listening skills and above all, have the ability to inspire others.

The concept of leadership from time immemorial has carried the notion of masculinity and the belief that men make better leaders than women. According to Hojgaard (2002), the societal conventions regarding gender and leadership traditionally exclude women, and the top leadership is viewed as a masculine domain. In our society, it is believed that men lead and women follow. It is not uncommon in our rural villages to find a man literally walking ahead of a woman. Different reasons may be advanced for this but ultimately it illustrates the deeply held notion of leadership as masculine. There is further argument that the cultural construction of leadership in itself instigates difference and this is only now being transformed or contested as women gain access to leadership positions and continue to aspire for leadership positions in all spheres of governance in both public and private sectors. Great strides have been made in the political realm, and women's participation in both the freedom struggles and democratic processes have been notable.

We are all aware of the role that women play as political leaders and entrepreneurs in Nigeria, especially as heads of government agencies at all levels (federal, state and local governments) and heads of small and medium-sized businesses.

In essence, the following attributes can be ascribed to future young women leaders in the next generation:

1. Passion and Ability to Inspire

Have passion for work and the capacity to motivate others with their passion.

2. Clear Set of Values

Have a clear set of values and live accordingly, act in ways that support her beliefs and that would motivate others to become advocates for social change and innovation.

3. Commitment to Community and Nation

Be other-focused as opposed to self-focused; be active members of community organizations and activities, freely giving time and talents to benefit people

4. Selflessness and Acceptance of Others

Display acts of selfless service and acceptance of others who are in need, for example, the less-privileged, the disabled, the elderly, etc. Never see barriers, rather, see the needs of others and act on them no matter what their background or circumstances.

5. Ability to Overcome Obstacles

Be able to show that success is possible even against all odds. Self efficacy, the ability to believe in oneself and show that one can make a difference in the nation and the world at large. Be able to inspire others to learn and also be able to show that positive values can be lived each day.

In all, we can adduce that excellent progress has been made in the exemplary leadership skills of our present female leaders such as Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala who is the Minister of Finance and the coordinating Minister of the Economy.

With Dr. Okonjo-Iweala and others like her, Nigeria and indeed Africa is poised to emerge as a leader in economic growth, political and social development. She has made and is still making an immense contribution towards this development. In her previous and current position as the first female Finance Minister in Nigeria (2003-2006) and as Managing Director of the World Bank and head of the Makeda Fund, she has stood firmly and loudly against corruption and fought for increased accountability and transparency. She has made significant and landmark contributions to the growth and development of the nation through hard work and a strong determination to succeed.

This woman along with many others has risen above barriers related to social and cultural expectations, the choice/or balance between work and family, and the stress that accompanies positions of leadership. She has fought for recognition despite the risks involved and has come out on top in her chosen field. She is a role model for young women in Nigeria to aim high for their futures. Thus one can say that the future leadership role of young women is very bright and can be looked at more optimistically now because of the achievements and recognition accorded to today's female leaders.

I see a new image for future female leaders: they are well-educated, prepared to

take on steady jobs with fair pay; are free to make important decisions and participate in decision-making; are active in their community and in public life; and gain recognition and inclusion in all structures of governance.