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UCT research highlights the unique contribution of women to leadership and socio-political transformation in Africa

A PhD thesis from the University of Cape Town's Graduate School of Business within the Faculty of Commerce explores women's experiences within senior leadership positions in organisations, with particular reference to South Africa and Kenya.

Dr Njeri Mwangi graduated with a doctoral degree in Business Administration in June of 2016. Her thesis examines the obstacles that hinder, and mechanisms that can facilitate and support women's leadership and applied knowledge in African based organisations.

Focusing on cultural and structural elements within organisational environments, Mwangi's research underscores that women within leadership positions often have to navigate significant obstacles, enforced by exclusive and hierarchical organisational cultures and structures, based on residual colonial and prejudicial patriarchal norms.

In order to address these issues, Mwangi recommends that significant efforts be applied to dismantling the persistent and subtle aspects of gender discrimination and prejudice. Implementation of appropriate policies and supportive mechanisms is crucial within organisations to realise equitable representation at leadership levels. These include instituting and endorsing gender equity and diversity policies, networking forums maximizing on online platforms, mentorship and relevant training programmes, and approaches to organisational (un)learning.

As there is limited research focusing on women's experiences of organisational leadership in the African context, Mwangi's contribution to this discussion is valuable and noteworthy. "I was particularly interested to study the contexts of Kenya, my country of birth, and South Africa, my country of residence. I was further motivated by the need to expand the knowledge and expertise pool in the search for critical solutions to African challenges. Tapping meaningfully, rather than superficially, into the potential of women

may yield fresh approaches towards realising prosperous futures for the continent, with benefits that may accrue at wider international levels.”

Mwagiru’s research offers insights that can improve organisational contexts for women in leadership positions, and substantiate women’s meaningful contributions to organisational leadership, knowledge and performance in African contexts.

“The dismal statistics of women in senior leadership positions within organisations worldwide, despite decades of discourse and multiple studies promoting equal representation, raises questions about what more can be done to achieve necessary gender equity and diversity in organisational leadership,” notes Mwagiru.

Not only does Mwagiru’s research suggest approaches needed to address the under-representation of women in senior leadership positions in organisations, but it also recognises the unique contributions that women can and have made to African based organisations, as well as to socio-political transformation within the business and education sectors.

“Truly valuing women’s experience and expertise, as opposed to tokenism, can beneficially enhance organisational performance and achievement of development goals at national and regional level, for the continent as well as internationally,” she says.

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Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

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