

Female Academics Career Development - Stories from Senior Female Academics in Tanzania's Public Universities

<https://doi.org/10.36369/2616-9045/2024/v13i1a2>

Online ISSN: 2616-9045.Print ISSN: 2218-5615

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Abstract

This paper investigates the career experiences of female academics in Tanzanian public universities, employing a qualitative methodology to elucidate their career development trajectories. Data were collected through interviews with senior female academics and a comprehensive literature review and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that career advancement among these women is driven by a desire for professional growth, a commitment to excellence, the influence of role models, family support, efforts to challenge cultural norms, and opportunities provided by scholarships. The study concludes that personal dedication and growth motivation are critical in promoting the career advancement of female academics. It recommends fostering collaborative research, publication, outreach, and consultancy initiatives among male and female academics to support the career development of women in public universities in Tanzania.

Keywords: Female academics, Career development, Senior positions, Public universities, Tanzania

Introduction

For many years, women in higher education were underrepresented in senior positions, which sparked discussions around the world about why there were so few of them despite



making up more than half of the world's population (Gandhi & Sen, 2020). Their share of decision positions is crucial for sustainable development in both Africa and other continents. The absence of women in senior roles in higher education is a global issue that calls for more expansive and diversified perspectives that take into account the full range of gender balance issues (Kyauke, 2022). This argument can be proved by different statistics all over the world.

For instance, only 21% of women in academia in the European Union have achieved the highest academic career level, full professorships, while in the United Kingdom, only 26% of women in academia have full professorships (Johns, 2020). Only 22% of women in academia in India are full-time professors). Women made up 42% of the academic workforce in Canada in 2021–2022 but only 31.5% of full professor posts, while holding 56.4% of positions at the lowest academic levels (Gitnux, 2023). According to Devlin (2021), in Australia, over the period of 2015 – 2019, there were “86% more men than women at the associate professor and professor levels. These statistics proved that both in Europe and Asia, women are few in top positions.

The scope of the problem is widespread in Africa, Tanzania included. According to Education Sub-Saharan Africa (2021) only 24% of academic staff in universities and Colleges in sub-Saharan Africa are female. In Nigeria, the percent is smaller as only 17% of staff are female. This gap in the number of female university staff has contributed to an increase in the problem. Moreover, in Ghana and South Africa, for instance, only 8% and 18.5% of female academia have attained a full professorship position, while 29.8% of female academics in South Africa have associate professorship (UNESCO, 2019). The data showed that, even in countries with many universities and colleges, female academic staff is not represented.

In Tanzania, 30% of the academic staff in higher learning institutions is women (TCU, 2021). For instance, at the University of Dar es Salaam, only 12% (4 out of 33) of full professors are women and 38%, which is 21 out of 55 associate professors, are female (UDSM, 2020). In addition, 30 (20%) out of 147 senior lecturers were female (UDSM, 2020). The situation is worse in the Open University of Tanzania, where there were no female professors among the three professors, and only 1(12.5%) female academic holds an associate professor position out of 8 associate professors. The number of female senior academic staff is only 4(19%) out of 21 senior academic staff (OUT, 2018). Only 4 (19%) female senior lecturers were out of the 21 senior lecturers at the Open University of Tanzania. At Sokoine University of Agriculture, only 2.23% of female academia is female full professors, while female associate professors are only 1.86%. Again, only 1.62% of academicians in the rank of senior lecturers were female (Massawe and Sife, 2020).

These statistics show that the majority of academia in Tanzania and in the African sub-Saharan are concentrated in lower academic positions, and the rate of advancement into



senior academic positions is likewise slow in many universities. The proportion of women at the junior academic levels is frequently comparable to or even higher than that of female PhD students, indicating that the number of female academic staff declines not when they begin their academic careers after receiving their PhDs but rather as they rise through the ranks (UNESCO, 2023).

In order to advance gender equality, the government of Tanzania carries out a number of activities, such as equitable job opportunities, gender policies, and gender strategies to eradicate inequality. However, many public colleges, where the gender gap is often more pronounced, underrepresent women in senior positions (Tarimo and Swai, 2020). Although significant progress has been made in several areas to reduce gender disparity, the issue persists in many Tanzanian higher education institutions (Masawe and Sife, 2020).

Many institutions are under pressure to meet the needs of a diverse workforce, which includes more and more women (Gilbert and Tarimo, 2023). Organisations must consider what supports female academicians' success in meeting their demands for professional growth and, of course, remaining competitive (Murniati, 2012). Supporting female lecturers' academic career advancement positively affects gender equality in society since universities play a role in forming society and producing engaged citizens. Given that leadership potential in higher education is correlated with academic rank (Nabawanuka, 2023), the tendency has an impact on the proportion of female staff holding leadership roles in higher learning institutions.

Many researchers, such as Tarimo (2019), Tarimo and Swai (2020), William (2017), and Khan *et al* (2021) focused on factors that hinder female advancement to higher positions in organisations. Yet, limited updated research, such as Malelle *et al* (2017) focuses on the factors that facilitate career development, especially female careers in higher learning institutions. Few studies like that of Luburu (2011); Murniati (2012) and Gardiner (2007) were done but the findings are limited to explain the realities. Nonetheless, some other studies, such as Kyauke, (2022); Bachilula, *et al* (2022); Gandhi, & Sen (2020) and Mwakitalu *et al* (2022) focused on leadership roles. This paper emphasised the need to document people and groups' initiatives to improve women's academic careers and better understand the variables that favour their advancement in public universities.

The assumption is that if there are enough women in higher positions, the decision-making may take into account women's issues and interests, as argued by Munissy and Tarimo (2023), Swai (2017), Swai and Masue (2019), who emphasised that women's empowerment and involvement in the decision-making enable them to play an active role in the important decision making and promotes sustainable development as clarified in the [Agenda 2030](#) and [Africa Union's Agenda 2063](#). This paper investigates factors that facilitate female academics' career development at government universities. The study



was enriched by the social cognitive career theory founded by Lent et al. (1994), which incorporates elements that enable people to exercise control over their professional growth. This theory is relevant because it takes individual initiatives as the starting point to growth. The assumption is that self-drive or motivation is very important before other factors are considered.

Methods

A qualitative approach was applied to understand and interpret career realities through the meanings that senior female academics assigned to their professional experiences. Multiple case studies were used as the research design for this study. Five public institutions in Tanzania were included in the study based on their accreditation status, age, and location through many case studies. Some of the data used came from a master's thesis, which was done by Tarimo (2019). Additional data for this paper came from follow-up interviews with senior female academicians in public universities. These universities are designated anonymously as Universities A, B, C, D, and E in order to observe ethical reporting concerns.

The study's participants were chosen using a purposive sample technique based on the prospectus of the collaborating university (2020–2021). Using this technique, the researcher was able to choose competent participants. Emails explaining the study and asking them to engage in it were sent to the chosen participants. A detailed telephone interview was used to gather information from 20 participants after obtaining their permission.

In order to maintain consistency and make sure all questions and challenging ones were asked, an interview guide was employed. Within 72 hours of the interview, the recorded information was transcribed in order to fill in any blanks. While the interviews were conducted in both English and Swahili, translations were done simultaneously in English. The transcripts were then read numerous times to cross-check the accuracy of the data and understand the general meaning of the data.

Different themes from the interviews were described through thematic analysis, and the themes that were found were combined in accordance with the study's goal to prevent duplication. Several themes were already predicted when examining the literature and creating the data-gathering tool. Deductive analysis of the narration written down by respondents revealed additional topics. Similar themes were given significance, and the conclusions were created depending on how they were integrated and interpreted during the study.



Factors that Facilitate Female Career Advancement

The paper aimed to examine the elements that aid female academicians in Tanzania's public universities in advancing their careers. The variables that facilitate female academics to advance to senior positions in their careers include self-motivation, family support, the influence of role models, the desire to challenge cultural norms and scholarship grants. The participant discussed their own experiences with obstacles they have encountered along the way to professional success. This section includes quotes from the stories of female academicians that could guide other female academics who wish to learn strategies to advance in their careers.

Self-Motivation

Most of the interviewed participants shared that their interest in growing in their profession was among the factors that motivated them to work hard and grow in their careers. Senior female academicians expressed that the 'love for teaching' is intrinsic to their academic career development. One participant went further, claiming that being an academician was among her dreams; thus, progressing in this career is to live her dream. The participant further expressed that she was driven by *self-motivation* to fulfil her dream of being a professor at the University, and she tried to work hard to make sure she would be a professor as clarified;

I love lecturing, and I wanted to live my dream... the prestige of being called a Professor, being read about, publishing books and doing consultations motivated me to progress to senior positions (Interview, Participant 2, University A, October 2022)

Some female academics are motivated to advance in their careers because they enjoy teaching and reading. Some female academicians expressed that it is not easy to be promoted to higher positions if you do not love your work and love what you normally do. The passion spent by anyone to reach senior positions in an academic environment is much more dependent on the intrinsic value of the education the person attaches to her career. One of the participants said:

I love my job and what I'm doing; I enjoy reading, which has influenced my career choice and progression. This passion helped me to reach a senior position faster compared to other females and even males of my age (Interview, Participant 11, University E, December 2022)

The view of this female academician suggested having self-motivation that made her work hard. This reflects the views of other participants who explained that *she prefers to work*



smart rather than hard and use her brain effectively and efficiently while expressing ideas freely (Interview, Participant 20, University B, November 2022).

According to the findings, self-motivation facilitates the career development of female academicians. Some of these findings support those stated by Tarimo and Swai (2020) and Raburu (2011), two researchers who investigated the experiences of senior female academics in Kenya and Tanzania, respectively. This study went beyond hearing the testimonies of female academics on how they have managed to climb the ladder of their career. Family responsibilities burden females, so climbing the academic ladder may be a huge challenge. Women still do most of the caring, educating, cooking and cleaning in homes; these chores require time that may be dedicated to publication and research, which are critical for promotion. These responsibilities take the extra hours available to women in the evenings and at weekends; therefore, self-motivation and hard work are needed for them to progress.

The Influence of Family and Role Models

Family support and the influence of role models were the factors that encouraged female academics to join and grow in their careers. The participants shared the opinions that family members and university professors from colleges and universities pushed them. While some participants said they *wanted to fulfil their dream of being a professor*, others said they were inspired by their mothers who fought to be good wives and mothers and progressed well in their careers. One of the participants said that

Since I attended a university and got a glimpse into the life of a professor, I became self-driven and wanted to realise my dream of becoming one. Their personal tales, arguments, and use of logic captured my attention. My research supervisor was a professor who helped me perform better and taught me a lot (Interview with Participant 18, University C, December 2022).

Female academic staff with a role model to follow can invest more in career progress. This means that role models facilitate the career progression of some female academic staff. Women find reasons to continue fighting for their careers while shouldering other responsibilities effectively.

Another participant shared her story, indicating that her mother was her role model and had to follow what she normally told her because she did not want to let her down. She said;

My mother was a teacher who always emphasised the value of education; she normally checked my homework when I was a child and warned me of poor academic performance (Interview, Participant 6, University D, November 2022).



This participant confirmed the influence of a role model to encourage and motivate her to work hard and progress in her career.

Some participants were motivated by their families' success, while others were motivated by the hard economic status of their families. One participant explained her scenario when her parents decided to sell a piece of land to ensure that she was supported to go for studies; to her, she felt had a burden to pay to her parents and family in general, and therefore, it was a push for her to work hard to make her parents and family will be supported. This corresponds to the view of another participant who narrated a story about her own mother, who was forced to be married because she was denied an opportunity to study. The mother kept reminding her to make sure she used the opportunity to study and warned her not to be a housewife like her. She said her mother's words pushed her to work hard and, therefore, felt that hard work was the only weapon she could use to progress.

Family support and having a role model is among the factors that aided female academics' career advancement. The results show that both mothers and fathers played a part in career success. This implies that family and friends' support is a factor in the career journey, as highlighted by Raburu (2011).

Scholarship Award

The majority of participants mentioned having received grants for a master's degree, a doctorate, or both from various scholarship programs, including those from the British Council, the Commonwealth, the German Scholarship, and others from China and the Netherlands. Some female academicians received financial support to study for their PhD in Africa. Most participants clarified that it motivates females to advance in their careers. The participants further clarified that studying abroad helped them to work with professors in their field who groomed them to be research experts and learn how to excel in a publication, which is an important factor for promotion to senior positions. It was clarified by one of the participants that

The Inter-University Council of East Africa helped me get a Master's degree scholarship, which encouraged me to advance in my work (Interview, Participant 8 University B November 2022).

Some female academics shared the experience that they often applied for scholarships but were unsuccessful. They further clarified that the University management, through designed university programs, frequently supports them in studying the programme of their preference.



Another element in this study to assist career advancement through training and development was the scholarship grant. Some participants found that studying abroad helped them advance in their careers. For instance, Raburu (2011) stated that academic women who studied overseas were better able to develop the abilities they needed for the workplace. This meant that the understanding of research and publication that they learned while in school was crucial for their promotion to senior positions.

It is significant to remember, as stated by Chitsamatanga et al. (2018), that once academics are sponsored to earn PhDs, attend conferences or other relevant training, both locally and internationally, it helps them make friends, get exposure to academic gurus who may serve as mentors, and establishing social networks that are essential for the advancement of their academic careers. Similar to this, taking part in academic activities gives students self-assurance and career advice to increase their job mobility.

It is stated that obstacles, such as those relating to funding, have led to the low numbers of females in higher education in Africa. Undoubtedly, a major obstacle to higher education in Africa is a lack of financing. The competition grounds appear to be uneven for men and women. Women are more likely to wish to start a family before completing a PhD due to their biological clock. But by then, they might be approaching or have beyond the 35-year cutoff mark required by several funding organisations to be eligible for PhD scholarships. These kinds of roadblocks need to be eliminated.

Wish to Change Cultural Beliefs

Some participants expressed their view that they grew up in a society where males and females were mostly treated differently, and females were treated unfairly. This was shared as the driving force for some of these female academicians to prove their abilities in their society.

Because of the way we were raised in society, some women think we are weak and incapable of performing tasks like men. I decided to disprove their claims. When I disagree with these cultural norms, I am really nasty (Interview with Participant 9, University A, October 2022).

This corresponds to the view of a participant who shared the story of her mother, which pushed her to study and work hard to change society's beliefs.

My mother dropped out of school to be married, and since I came from a low-income home, her example inspired me to work hard in school and prove to society that women can succeed in the same fields as men, if not better. (Interview, December 2022, Participant 15, University E)



While some female academicians work hard to change society's beliefs, they also qualify for promotion to higher academic positions and thus progress in their careers. This is an indication that women have determination and are driven by a goal, which is an important factor for career growth in academia.

The professional advancement of female academics has been found to be facilitated by cultural attitudes and gender perceptions. Society's pessimistic view encourages women to pursue education and hard work in an effort to change the norms. According to Raburu (2011), gender and culture shaped and developed the self-confidence of female academics, which boosted their achievement. In addition to the experiences that the female academics in this survey recounted, confidence is crucial for women to advance in their academic careers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper concludes that personal commitment and growth motivation are important factors in facilitating female career growth. Other factors that facilitate women's career growth include eagerness to be the best performer, the influence of family support and role models, wishes to change cultural beliefs and scholarship awards. The paper recommends establishing mentorship programs to support early-career female academics where early-career female academics are attached to an experienced senior academic for mentorship. Team working in research, publications and consultancies among male and female academicians should be encouraged to facilitate learning and publications for career advancement in public universities in Tanzania. Partnership programmes between public and private universities across Africa and beyond are important to expand scholarship opportunities and mobility between institutions to enhance research and publications. Scholarship packages specific to women should be expanded to allow breastfeeding, maternity leave and daycare for small children while allowing parent mentorships to help their children choose their best careers.

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