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Problematising women's leadership in the African context

article

Jacqui Poltera and Jenny Schreiner

abstract

This article is a response to a longstanding debate about what feminist theorists and leadership scholars mean when they refer to "women's leadership in the African context". (The debate was sparked again as a response to the initial call for papers for this topic.) We argue that there is ultimately a need for more caution and conceptual clarity in employing terms such as "women's leadership" and "in the African context" since they are contested and ambiguous. In so doing we situate both terms within broader interdisciplinary debates about feminist leadership theory, mainstream leadership theory, and discussions of African values as they pertain to leadership. We argue that there is a need to avoid essentialist, reductive assumptions about gender and leadership that can, among other things, place undue pressure on women in leadership positions. In so doing we distinguish leadership from ethical, effective leadership and offer an exploratory discussion of how some of the challenges we raise here might be addressed.

keywords

women's leadership, African ethics, feminism, *Ubuntu*, non-essentialism, glass ceiling

Introduction

This article stems from a heated dialogue between a leftist, Marxist-Leninist feminist activist working in the public sector and politics, and an analytic feminist philosopher and academic. It was sparked by a shared frustration with the ambiguous, all-encompassing nature of the term "women's leadership" in feminist literature, leadership theory, and professional contexts. In responding to the call for a special edition on "women's leadership in the African context", our starting point was that despite our difference in age, background, profession, political affiliation and discipline, we both identified a risk to presuppose key terms such "women's leadership" and the "African context" are self-evident or well-defined. To that end we set about trawling through interdisciplinary research to find out more.

Leadership theories have tended to be informed by the experiences of white, middle-class, men in developed countries. Mainstream leadership theory has also tended to overlook the fact that in many African countries, "barriers imposed by colonialism, Christianity, capitalism, cultural traditions, and the colonial and postcolonial states continue to curtail the rights of women severely" (Ncube, 2010:77). Put simply, patriarchal, colonial Christianity typically operates with a conception of women as subordinate to men and confined to the private domain, rather than matriarchs and cultural leaders in their own right. In response to such narrow conceptions of leadership, there has been a surge of interest in

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"women's leadership" (Gouws and Kotze, 2007; Gouws, 2008; Dzubinski and Diehl, 2018; Goyal, 2015) and "African leadership" (Metz, 2018; Ndlovu, 2016). Despite the virtues of redressing the aforementioned deficit in discussions about leadership, a fundamental issue is that the terms "women", "leadership" and "the African context" are contested and ambiguous.

This article is a response to that ambiguity, designed to problematise the very concepts employed in this special edition, and to spark further thought about how we as feminist theorists and activists define key terms. It is first and foremost an exercise in understanding and conceptual analysis which raises as many questions as it answers. There is a need for more conceptual clarity and care in defining what we mean when we refer to "women's leadership" to mitigate against gender essentialism,[1] the assumption that individual women leaders will advance women's rights, or inadvertently having expectations of individual women in (particularly formal) leadership positions that exceed those of their male counterparts. An implication of our view is that a person's gender or sex alone does not amount to her being an effective or indeed ethical leader. Being an effective, ethical leader is intimately connected to the contexts, organisational and power structures within which leadership is enacted.

Leadership practice is arguably shaped by the contexts in which specific women or groups of women enact leadership. For example, women who practice leadership in developed, western countries and contexts are likely to face different opportunities and barriers to women in developing countries in Africa. African women in rural communities are likely to face different leadership opportunities and barriers than, for example, Indian or European women executives in business centres. As such, more rigorous intellectual work is required to analyse how systems, structures and social relations of class exploitation, patriarchy, national and racial oppression, influence the leadership practice of women.

Just as attempts to include leadership practices in Africa into mainstream leadership theory are positive, so is it important not to suggest (inadvertently or otherwise) that the African context is monolithic or reducible. Although an exhaustive analysis of women's leadership in the African context lies outside the scope of this article, in responding to the issues outlined above, we outline some similarities in the broad values and ideals identified in scholarship about African leadership, African ethics and women's leadership respectively, which, we think, provide a framework for an ideal of effective, ethical leadership.

What do we mean by "women's leadership"?

The term "women's leadership" is ambiguous and contested (O'Connor, 2010; Batliwala, 2011). Does it refer to particular women or groups of women? Women in formal, appointed leadership positions associated with power and influence? Leadership by women (formal or informal) that advances women's rights? Individual women who are leaders? Exercise of power by women organised as a collective? Leadership as individual achievement? Social and organisational determinants of leadership? Leadership at the behest of a political party or part of a collective? Leadership styles and / or traits shaped by values and qualities that we tend to associate more with women than men? If so, what are those values and qualities and are they really more attributable to women than to men? Are women more likely to lead in a certain way than men? Is women's leadership synonymous with "feminist leadership"? If so, how is feminist leadership defined and understood?

As the questions above illustrate, the concept of "women's leadership in the African context" could be interpreted in a range of ways. At its most basic, "women's leadership" is an umbrella term which includes both descriptive and normative assumptions. At a descriptive level, women's leadership refers to women (as individuals or groups) in leadership positions (formal or informal) and focuses on outlining the experiences of women who enact leadership. Normative claims with respect to women's leadership include the need to: redress gaps in the number and earnings of women in appointed leadership positions relative to men, increase recognition of women's leadership, and diversify mainstream leadership theory by increasing experiences of underrepresented groups such as women in Africa. Women's

leadership so understood is distinct from "feminist transformational leadership" (Batliwala, 2011) that has a particular philosophical and political agenda, and can be understood as a normative account of leadership - by women or men - that achieves positive social change, advances women's rights and gender justice, and aims to redress power relationships. Although we recognise "feminist leadership" is prone to similar concerns identified with "women's leadership", we nevertheless think Batliwala's discussion is a neat way to distinguish claims about "women's leadership" from claims about leadership which advances women's rights. We return to this distinction between women's leadership and feminist transformational leadership in due course.

In what follows, we start by outlining the motivations and assumptions underpinning three distinct, though related aspects of theoretical discussions about women's leadership. In so doing, we expand on some of the points outlined above.

The glass-ceiling: disparities in representation and pay

First, research on women's leadership is driven by a recognition that despite improvements in representation of women in formal leadership positions, overall there remains a glass ceiling for women in leadership. There are still far less women leaders[2] in "politics, business, government, education, non-profits, and other settings and sectors around the globe" (Madsen and Andrade, 2018:62). Put simply, formal leaders tend to be appointed and have formal authority and power, whereas informal leaders influence the behaviour of others but may not have formal authority and / or power despite their influence. That said, the term women's leadership is not limited to women in formal positions of political or professional leadership roles (Gasa, 2007). Rather, appeals to women's leadership include individual women and / or groups of women who enact leadership in informal settings, and can drive positive change outside of organisations. For example, informal women's leadership has been a key focus of social movement research focused on the ways in which women as individuals and collectives can drive transformative social change, improve rights, advocate and mobilise (Herda-Rapp, 1998; Mama and Okazawa-Rey, 2012). Although the term women's leadership includes both formal and informal leadership, and what we discuss here is not at odds with the latter, the focus of the remainder of the discussion is on formal leadership.

The disparity between men and women in formal leadership positions that are visible, influential and recognised as powerful is well documented (Trigg and Bernstein, 2016; Barnes and Burchard, 2013). The descriptive claim is that there is an asymmetry and inequity in the number of women in leadership positions relative to men and a persistent "gender pay gap" in what women in leadership positions earn relative to their male counterparts (Bishu and Alkadry, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2018). These inequities are perhaps most noticeable in high-powered leadership positions. For example, women are rarely appointed prime ministers, CEOs, board members, presidents, vice-chancellors, senior politicians etc. and when they are, there tends to be a significant pay gap. In response to this, women's leadership theorists have focused on the need to improve gender quotas and close the pay gap between men and women in top leadership positions (Sojo *et al*, 2016; Clayton, 2015; Coffé, 2012; Darhour and Dahlerup, 2013; Tamale, 2000; Salo, 2012). The focus on achieving gender equality and empowerment is also a key United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). Briefly, SDG 5 aims to end all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls globally and achieve gender equality by 2030. Target 5.5 aims to "ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making in political, economic and public life" (UN Women, n.d.: n.p.; UN, n.d.). The normative assumption underpinning discussions of gender inequity is that disparities in roles and pay between men and women ought to be redressed through, among other things, setting and meeting quota targets to increase representation of women in leadership positions, advocating for equitable pay between men and women, and fostering professional cultures and organisational systems conducive to

attracting and retaining women leaders (Hinds, 2015; Fritz and Knippenberg, 2017).

The idea here is that women's leadership is as much about increased numerical and symbolic representation and addressing women's under-representation in politics, on boards, and in senior leadership positions, as it is about *how* women lead and the social impact of the leadership by women. In what follows we outline findings and themes in literature on gendered leadership differences.

Gendered leadership differences

Second, discussions of women's leadership are underpinned by the assumption that there are salient gendered differences between men and women which influence leadership styles and values. Representative here are debates that draw on trait theory and cite evidence which suggests women leaders tend to be more transformational, proactive in addressing problems, and generally have more leadership attributes positively associated with effective leadership than men (Eagly *et al,* 2003; Eagly, 2007; Chlala *et al,* 2004; Jogulu and Wood, 2006). It has also been argued that women's leadership aspiration, while high, is mediated by "communal orientation" (Fritz and Knippenberg, 2017:1018); leadership values associated with women tend to be more relational (Richardson and Loubier, 2008); and women can be more progressive in their values and supportive of diversity and gender equality (Gouws and Kotze, 2007). There is also research which focuses on the challenges for women in leadership roles due to the perceived incongruity between "being a leader" and "being a woman" (Eagly *et al,* 2003) and unconscious gender bias women leaders face (Madsen and Andrade, 2018). It is likely that some of the assumptions about women's leadership as collective, collaborative, relational and so on, stem from feminist activist movements and waves of feminism which have sought to challenge patriarchal power and the subordination of women.

Another descriptive claim in much of the literature is that, in general, despite the virtues of women in leadership positions and strengths of individual women leaders, women are more likely than men to experience "stereotype threat", namely, the view that they are inferior to men and do not fit the image of leadership (Hoyt and Murphy, 2016:388). This is because, traditionally, leadership theory has focused unduly on men as leaders, and characteristics associated with women (such as being more collaborative and relational) can at first glance appear at odds with traditional notions of leadership as transactional and authoritarian. Similarly, women in leadership positions typically experience more implicit gender bias than men (when a person does not consciously think of themselves as applying gender stereotypes and yet on an unconscious level they do) (Madsen and Andrade, 2018). For example, recruiters may think that they are pro diversity and improving gender equity and yet subconsciously judge women applicants more harshly than they do men. Associated normative implications are that organisations ought to put strategies in place to attract and retain more women leaders and redress stereotypes and unconscious bias.

While gender targets and goals can increase women's representation in formal leadership positions (Sojo *et al*, 2016) and may be necessary to redress inequity, they are not sufficient to achieve women's leadership in the normative sense outlined above. We revisit and expand this point in due course.

Bringing women's experiences into mainstream leadership theory

Third, the literature on women's leadership stems from a recognition of the relative paucity of theoretical and empirical work about women's experiences of leadership in mainstream leadership debates (Stead and Elliot, 2009; Lituchy *et al,* 2017; Batliwala, 2011) and the experiences of minority women in leadership (Dillard, 2018; Jean-Marie *et al,* 2009). The normative assumption here is that there is a need to redress the undue focus on white, western, middle-class, male-dominated conceptions of leadership and "male-normed assumptions" about what motivates people to pursue and / or assume leadership positions (Longman *et al*, 2018). Focusing on women's experiences of leadership highlights the complex power dynamics, patriarchal norms and structures that reinforce gendered inequalities (Hillenbrand *et al*, 2015), as well as the

apparent incongruence between being both a woman and a leader outlined above (Zeng *et al,* 2018). Women in leadership positions experience dual prejudices of being perceived less favourably than men and evaluated more harshly as leaders in virtue of their gender (Eagly *et al,* 2003; Madsen and Andrade, 2018).

In response to this, women's leadership theorists have argued for the importance of analysing women's experiences of leadership, tied as they are to the contexts, situations, power dynamics and relationships which shape them (Stead and Elliot, 2009; Gouws, 2008; Glass and Cook, 2015; Bauer and Burnet, 2013; Dillard, 2018). Such research tends towards being descriptive: analysing and showcasing the achievements and / or experiences of women in leadership positions (Klenke, 2011; Trigg and Bernstein, 2016). It also seeks to describe the ways in which individual women have led within specific contexts and at times against significant odds, focusing on women leaders' styles and characteristics (Stead and Elliot, 2009; Trigg and Bernstein, 2016). Despite the virtues of showcasing individual women leaders in particular contexts, on the whole these discussions tend to be more descriptive and less likely to engage critically with the structures and contexts in which they lead and how those systems enable or constrain effective leadership, even when they describe those contexts.[3] That said, the combined papers in Lituchy *et al* (2017) offer a comparative account of the differences between different countries and contexts relevant to discussion of women's leadership and how individual women enact leadership.

The idea here is that women's leadership is fundamentally shaped by relationships, systems, power dynamics and socio-economic environments. To analyse an individual leader or the leadership outside of the complex contexts in which they matured into adults and in which they lead (whether formally or informally) is a mistake. By extension, the experiences of individual or groups of women cannot be generalised to all women in leadership positions (Dillard, 2018; Dzubinski and Diehl, 2018). The normative assumption here is that the theory and practice of leadership ought to be more diverse and include the experiences of African countries, minority groups and the systems of power which influence whether women can effectively enact leadership. By implication, the experiences and voices of women in multiple minority groups subject to intersecting power dynamics and forms of oppression needs more consideration in contemporary leadership theories (Dillard, 2018).

This aspect of leadership theory has implications for discussions of leadership in the African context, a continent shaped by unique leadership challenges associated with decolonisation, corruption, poverty, population growth, transformation, development, and high rates of HIV/AIDs.

The need for non-essentialist accounts of "women's leadership"

The preceding discussions demonstrate that "women's leadership" is an ambiguous umbrella term associated with a range of (contested) descriptive and normative assumptions and claims. There is a widespread and persistent gap between women and men in formal leadership positions (both representation and pay) that ought to be redressed through mechanisms such as policies and programmes aimed at improving gender equality and pay parity, and minimising stereotypes and implicit gender bias. Despite agreeing that there is a need to attract and retain women leaders, we think it is a mistake to assume that such mechanisms will necessarily result in gender transformation or that, even if they do and more women assume formal leadership roles, those women will be effective, ethical leaders. If we apply the distinction between women's leadership and feminist transformational leadership in Batliwala (2011), the point here is that it is a mistake to conflate these terms or to assume that women will be transformational leaders committed to gender justice, for example. We build on this point in the following two sections.

Although the empirical evidence on gendered differences between men and women vis-à-vis leadership is frequently cited, and we accept that there may be a need to conduct more empirical and theoretical research into the nature of salient gendered differences in leadership, we shared a range of concerns. Despite the empirical evidence to support (albeit qualified)

generalisations about gendered differences in leadership, it was unclear whether the women who made up the evidence base were sufficiently diverse and representative. We were also resistant to any research which lent itself to essentialist claims about women as individuals or a collective. For example, that women leaders in public office will advance women's rights. Setting aside our overarching concerns about conceptual clarity for a minute, we also noted a relative deficit of such studies conducted in Africa, which has implications for discussions of women's leadership in the African context and may speak to the need for more research in this area. It is also an implication for our discussion here that theorising the difference between effective, ethical leadership and other forms of leadership remains a priority.

We agreed that despite improvements in the field, there is a relative dearth of leadership theory informed by the experiences of women and other minority groups. As such, feminists and leadership theorists in particular, ought to continue to critically analyse women's unique experiences of leadership and the contexts in which leadership is enabled or constrained. There is also a need for more pressure on researchers working in this area to spell out what particular women they are referring to and how factors such as class, culture, upbringing, education, race, sex and gender shape their experiences of leadership.

Despite the importance of including the experiences of minority groups in mainstream leadership theory, improving the gender pay gap, and creating social and organisational climates more conducive to attracting, retaining and recognising women leaders, merely increasing symbolic and numerical representation of women in (particularly formal) leadership positions is insufficient to redress the inequities or promote effective leadership. For example, if a given organisation meets their quotas for women in leadership positions and yet those women are unethical or ineffectual leaders, there is a risk that efforts to improve the status quo for women and redress stereotypes could be threatened. A less extreme example is that women in leadership positions may not be gender sensitive or inclined to redress inequities. In keeping with this, some theorists have argued that gender quotas are 'artificial' or tokenistic solutions to women's under-representation (Krook, 2013), and can fail to promote "gender-transformative change" to those power dynamics and structures that reinforce gender bias and gendered inequalities (Hillenbrand *et al*, 2015).

Overall, we thought much of the literature on women's leadership in feminist scholarship and leadership theory ran the risk of essentialist assumptions. For example, the common-sense conception that by virtue of their gender, female leaders will be more progressive, community-minded, relational and more likely to promote women's rights. Gender-sensitive, progressive, and relational leadership is not exclusively the domain of women who lead, even if some women leaders are more likely than men to, for example, advance women's rights. Our note of caution here is that appeals to women's leadership, in the absence of conceptual clarity, can fail to critically engage with other dimensions of effective leadership. As Dzubinski and Diehl argue, "fundamentally, gender essentialism offers exculpatory power to women's challenges in leadership: If gender is tied to biology and is unchangeable, then societal and organisational inequalities between men and women can be attributed to nature rather than social structures" (2018:58). Batliwala's discussion of feminist transformational leadership helps to mitigate the above problem, though does not escape the criticism that it might place undue pressure on women in leadership positions to promote women's rights and gender justice (where male leaders are less likely to face similar expectations).

The challenge associated with discussions of women's leadership is that the stakes and expectations for women in leadership positions can (inadvertently or otherwise) be higher than they are for men. Insofar as implicit gender bias and stereotype threat persist, the expectation that women will be ineffectual leaders is higher, as is the pressure on women in leadership positions to demonstrate that they do not fit the stereotypes and can be effective leaders. For example, the "*Lean In* movement"[4] which calls on women to work and push harder to chase down opportunities for leadership advancement. This - and

other leadership narratives directed at women - have been criticised for failing to be responsive to diversity between women, structural inequalities, and power imbalances (Dillard, 2018). Again here, the implication is that expectations of women who lead can be unduly high and compound the existing pressures women face to enact leadership at all, let alone effectively.

For the reasons outlined above, feminists, leadership theorists and activists working on "women's leadership" need to critically analyse the sense in which they are employing the term and be mindful of unconscious bias which inadvertently disadvantages women leaders. More specifically, they need to guard against unfair, inequitable expectations of women who lead. The term "women's leadership" ideally needs to be responsive to the complex contexts and power dynamics in which women lead (formally or otherwise), and yet distinguished from normative assumptions about ethical, effective and / or transformational leadership. By implication, appeals to women's leadership in the African context cannot treat women or Africa as homogeneous, and ideally need to distinguish effective, ethical leadership from "women's leadership". In what follows we briefly build on these claims.

Leadership in the African context

There is no monolithic African culture or context. Within and across African countries and contexts, there are multifarious racial, socio-cultural, ethnic, political, and historical norms which shape power relations and inform the ways in which women can and do lead (Lituchy *et al,* 2017; Amadiume, 1987; 1998; Mama and Okazawa-Rey, 2012; Phiri and Nadar, 2009; Geisler, 1995; 2000; 2004). For example, evidence demonstrates that Northern African countries generally fare worse in terms of economic participation, equal opportunities and representation of women in formal leadership positions than sub-Saharan African countries (Punnett and Clarke, 2017). Further, while countries such as Rwanda and Tanzania have constitutional requirements for gender quotas, the same is not true of all African countries. African women have also been elected presidents in some countries (Liberia and Malawi are a case in point), while other African countries are more patriarchal. Patriarchy, structural inequality and oppression is juxtaposed with initiatives such as Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want which identifies women's leadership at all levels as crucial. Agenda 2063 and The African Women's Decade (2010-2020) demonstrate the ways in which the African context is being consciously shaped into a gender-sensitive continent, even though there remain significant challenges in the recognition of women as leaders. These nuances and apparent contradictions speak to the need for continued critical work on the specific leadership challenges for women in different African countries and contexts.

Nevertheless, as outlined above, there are some broad defining features of the continent relevant to understanding shared leadership challenges. Some of the main leadership challenges in Africa include corruption, oppression, political conflict, cultural pluralism, partialism, colonial legacy, and inequality (Ndlovu, 2016; Lituchy *et al,* 2017). There are also governance challenges across the continent, economic instability, a dearth of effective, ethical leadership, and challenges associated with being resource rich, a volatile global environment, and rapid economic growth (Lituchy *et al*, 2017; Ncube, 2010). As with all leadership and perhaps especially in the African context, ethical challenges are present (Nicholson, 2005). The need for ethical, effective leadership is fundamental in Africa, given the relatively high rates of corruption, inequality and oppression. These have arguably been generated by much of the post-colonial experience of primitive accumulation by aspirant bourgeois classes through a parasitic relationship with the state, organs of government and the resources at the disposal of the fiscus. Inherent in this accumulation route via the state, is what appears to be a style of leadership driven by self or group interest. Acknowledging this does not preclude the fact that leadership challenges admit of degrees and apply to a greater or lesser extent relative to individual contexts within the African continent. Further, such challenges are relevant to all leaders, regardless of their gender.

In patriarchal, culturally conservative African countries and contexts, women

face additional challenges as leaders due to historical disempowerment, oppression and discrimination. For example, African women – on the whole – have been subjected to high levels of discrimination, socio-economic and political exclusion, gender-based violence, and limited access to education, all of which present barriers to their ability to enact leadership, achieve recognition for leadership, and assume formal leadership positions. It has been argued that insofar as being a man is a requirement for being in a leadership position in some African countries, women's capacity to enact leadership can be severely constrained[5] (Nkomo and Ngambi, 2014; Lituchy *et al,* 2017). The idea here is that there is a so-called "big man" conception of leaders as male, decisive, all-powerful, authoritarians in some parts of Africa (Galperin *et al*, 2017). Although it presents barriers for women enacting leadership in contexts where a critical mass of people equate leadership with such "masculine" characteristics, and there are less opportunities for women to assume leadership positions as a result, there are two points worth highlighting here. First, individual women can be decisive, authoritarian leaders. Representative here is the aforementioned *Lean In* movement which implies women in search of leadership advancement take their cue from men in the workplace and display traits more frequently regarded as masculine. A non-essentialist conception of women's leadership readily allows for women to be effective leaders even in oppressive environments or if they lead in ways more commonly associated with male leaders.

Second, evidence demonstrates that the African context is also shaped by shared communitarian values and a tendency to associate effective leadership with servant leadership, honesty and integrity (Galperin *et al*, 2017). Briefly, in leadership theory, "servant-leaders make right decisions and behave in ethical ways based on values and integrity" (Lumpkin and Achen, 2018:16). In a similar vein, there is increased focus on the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* as encompassing shared and distinctly African values, namely, connectedness to each other and the community, harmony, dignity and compassion (Ncube, 2010; Metz, 2018; Gyekye, 2011). What is interesting here is the complex interplay between "masculine" African values and ideals as reflected in the "big man" theory outlined above, and the fact that traditional African values such as communitarianism and relationality have historically (at least in the Western leadership literature) tended to be associated with more "feminine" values and shares features with feminist, transformational leadership. In what follows we explore African values associated with *Ubuntu* and effective, ethical leadership in more detail.

Ubuntu and shared African values-based leadership

Ubuntu entails recognising that individuals are inescapably linked to and defined by their community and shared humanity, such that the good of the individual is informed by human relationships, and a good, or virtuous person (and thus leader) is one who cares for others and promotes human dignity and communal good. Although interpretations and applications of *Ubuntu* differ (Praeg and Magadla, 2014; Hoffman and Metz, 2017), for the purpose of this article we take our cue from theorists like Metz in applying a contemporary conception of *Ubuntu* as non-essentialist and consistent with promoting human dignity, care for others, individual human rights, and human connectedness and relations.

Ubuntu as a shared African value common across the continent, has increasingly been used to underpin conceptions of ethical leadership. Representative here is Metz's recent moral philosophical account of African leadership whereby an effective leader is one who "creates, sustains and enriches communal relationships, and enables others to do so" (Metz, 2018:36). Metz advances a secular, relational and egalitarian conception of leadership which stems from key African values outlined above. This aligns with recent empirical findings, such as the combined papers in Lituchy *et al* (2017), which found that although Africa is diverse and "consists of a multitude of languages and tribes", there is a "sense of communal belonging … reflected in the *Ubuntu* concept which defines the individual in terms of others … . In general, effective leaders in Africa are seen as visionary, good communicators, honest and

trustworthy, wise and knowledgeable, social, and hard-working" (Galperin and Alamuri, 2017:243). As a guiding value for leadership in Africa, *Ubuntu* requires recognising and seeking to promote the good of the community as a whole. By implication, this includes recognising and promoting the needs of marginalised groups and seeking to redress inequity and inequality.

There are some interesting overlaps between the claims above and more mainstream, Western contemporary literature on leadership which defines the hallmarks of effective leaders as demonstrating "awareness, empathy, fairness, integrity, moral values, motivation, trust, relationship management, respect, and self-management … effective leaders serve as ethical role models who manage themselves and others while serving others" (Lumpkin and Achen, 2018:17). Neither account of effective leadership is gender specific and both allow for the possibility that men or women could be effective leaders, where effective leaders are also ethical leaders. This serves as a note of caution not to conflate "women's leadership" with "effective leadership" or to assume that by virtue of their gender, women will be effective, ethical leaders. It may also be important to examine what constitutes "effective leadership" from different perspectives such as class, role or race. For example, what is effective leadership in the context of a private business management may well not be perceived to be effective or ethical when viewed from the perspective of women workers in that enterprise.

Literature on uniquely African leadership qualities and styles suggests that, in general, "Africans prefer leadership styles that are based on humanistic principles, and desire more participative leadership that values individuality, authenticity, and serving the community … in line with the *Ubuntu* leadership philosophy which promotes leading by example and doing the right thing" (Galperin and Alamuri, 2017:40). Acknowledging this is not to reduce leadership in the African context (whether by women or not) but to critically analyse some of the characteristics that distinguish it from mainstream conceptions of leadership. It is important that just as appeals to women's leadership need to guard against homogenising assumptions, so the same is true of discussions about African leadership.

On the face of it, there are some similarities in the values and ideals identified in discussions about African leadership, the shared values represented in *Ubuntu*, claims about what makes a leader effective in general, the discussion of feminist transformational leadership in Batliwala (2011), and some of the empirical findings which lend support to the view that women can be more effective leaders than men outlined in the preceding sections. When it comes to discussions of "women's leadership in the African context", *Ubuntu* can be used as a philosophical foundation on which to develop an African ideal of ethical, effective leadership which is characterised by care for others, relations between people, human dignity, communitarianism, and recognising the importance of individual human rights. This would allow for the importance of redressing gender inequity and including the experiences of minority groups into discussions of leadership (since women and minority groups form part of the African community), and yet would not conflate "women's leadership" with "effective, ethical leadership", or with the normative assumptions at play in feminist transformational leadership as promoting gender justice, women's rights and a particular philosophical and political agenda. We acknowledge, however, that more substantive theoretical work is required to advance this discussion and demonstrate how it might work in practice.

Conclusion

This article was borne out of frustration with the ambiguous, all-encompassing nature of the term "women's leadership" in some feminist literature and leadership theory. The more we read, the more concerned we became that despite the positives of bringing women's experiences into mainstream leadership theory, there was – overall – a lack of conceptual clarity which increased the risk of essentialist assumptions and reductive thinking. This highlighted the need to, as Batliwala argues, "nail the jelly to the wall" (2011:12) by deconstructing and seeking to clarify key concepts such as women's leadership. We had a similar concern about discussions of leadership "in the African context". We found ourselves discussing and debating the terms, our

exasperation increasing as we became more confused about how the terms were being used across different debates and disciplines. This article provides a snapshot of those discussions and our findings from the process of trying to seek clarity and sense making by applying our respective academic disciplines and worldviews.

In seeking to understand the notion of "women's leadership in the African context" we ended up problematising it. We have highlighted the need for more conceptual analysis and care in employing terms like "women", "leadership" and "the African context", perhaps especially in multi or interdisciplinary contexts where terms from one debate or discipline can be plucked and applied to others with limited conceptual clarity. Ultimately, we think it is preferable to understand "women's leadership in the African context" as an umbrella term which denotes complex challenges associated with being a woman (defined in terms of class, race, gender, culture etc.), a leader, and enacting leadership within particular African contexts (which are themselves complex and irreducible). This account is responsive to differences within and between women, cultures, countries and contexts, as well as power dynamics and structural inequalities. It also allows for the possibility that women who lead can be effective, ethical leaders, though – like men - they may not be. It avoids the concern of placing undue pressure on women to exemplify ethical, self-aware, honest leadership that advances gender equity if we do not demand the same of men. More research would be required to determine the extent to which women are more likely than men to be effective, ethical leaders in the sense outlined here. Nevertheless, we see this discussion as a starting point to promote ongoing discussion and to invite more feminists, activists and theorists to join us in conceptually analysing the terms we employ in our efforts to advance women's issues.

Notes

1. Briefly, gender essentialism denotes the tendency to apply intrinsic, fixed qualities to women and men and assume that these are biologically determined. For example, to claim that women are inherently more pro-social than men.
2. While we acknowledge debates on the distinction between sex and gender as defined by UN Women (see: https://trainingcentre.unwomen.org/mod/glossary/view.php?id=36), the focus of this article is predominantly on the social and gendered dimensions of leadership enacted by women and a discussion of sex and gender lies outside its scope.
3. See Batliwala (2011) for a discussion of the relationship between leadership, women and power dynamics, and O'Connor (2010) for a discussion of different contexts to which the terms "women's leadership" and "feminist leadership" applies.
4. This is based on Facebook Executive Sheryl Sandberg's 2013 book *Lean In*.
5. Although a discussion of the effects of colonialism and Christianity on matriarchal leadership lies outside the scope of this article, we see this as an important and interesting theoretical issue which warrants further investigation in forthcoming issues of *Agenda*.

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