

Sustainable Leadership: Lessons and Implications of a Leadership Development Program for Women Religious in Africa

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe the sustainable leadership strategies manifested in the ministries of women religious participants of a three-year Hilton-Supported leadership development program in Eastern Africa. Also, the study illustrates transformations in their personal lives, their institutions and communities. For this paper, three women religious were selected from 180 participants of the Sisters Leadership Development Initiative (SLDI) in program in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Data were collected through in-depth face-to-face interviews and site visit observations. Findings revealed that leadership development promoted sustainable leadership initiatives, dissemination of skills through mentoring and promulgation of development projects. The study concludes that leadership development is a viable strategy in encouraging women in Eastern Africa to develop relevant leadership competencies. These skills allow them to participate in policy development and take a seat at the decision-making table. The mentoring requirement of the program facilitated the transfer of skills and enhanced self-efficacy among both mentors and mentees.

Key words: Women religious, Sustainable leadership, Leadership development

Introduction

Encouraging women to showcase their leadership competencies is perhaps the most viable vehicle to driving positive change in Eastern Africa (Sikazwe 2006; Maathai 2006). Studies show that women in this region continue to struggle to raise the bar and break the barriers that hinder their own development and full participation in education, corporate and organizational management (Gouws 2008; Hollos 1998; Stromquist 1998; Sperandio and Kagoda 2008). There is need for studies to illustrate the leadership capacities and organizational involvement of women so as to encourage policy and leadership development agendas on women.

According to Gouws (2008), women in Africa come across many stumbling blocks as they aspire to leadership positions. The obstacles range from historical, cultural, and socio-political obstacles that inhibit their search to position themselves as leaders (Bloch and Tabachnic 1998; Brown and Ralph 1996; King and Hill 1998). In Eastern Africa, individual, organizational and socio-cultural obstacles render more women as underprivileged thereby impeding them from assuming decision-making positions in competition with male leaders. Amondi (2011) refers to these barriers as the glass ceiling because they prevent women's rise to top leadership positions. Gachukia (2002) and Otieno (2001) concur that because there are few women in leadership positions, there are not many female mentors and role models. To overcome the said barriers, there is need of leadership development for women to believe in themselves as leaders. Therefore, leadership development may provide a means for women to build confidence and self-efficacy to break the glass ceiling and empower them to take on a seat at the decision-making table.

Using three case studies selected from 180 women religious of Eastern Africa who were participants in a three-year Sisters Leadership Development Initiative (SLDI) program administered in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, we illustrate that engaging women in leadership programs will foster competencies and viable strategies to support them to perform beyond their expectations. Furthermore, we draw on lessons and implications from the experiences of the women religious participants of the SLDI program in sustaining leadership initiatives. The term *women religious* is used synonymously to refer to the *Catholic Sisters* – women who consciously and willingly engage in charitable works and respond to humanitarian needs in the communities they serve. Greenleaf (1998) referred to the people who respond to such desires/feelings as *servant leaders*. According to Greenleaf, the desire to be a servant leader begins with a natural feeling in an individual to want to serve, then, a conscious choice to aspire to lead. Since the 1970s, Greenleaf has studied a variety of congregations, seminaries, and church leadership systems, concluding with the term *servant leadership* – a type of leadership that emerges from within an individual's desire to serve, to care, and to meet the diverse needs of their people. This type of leadership is closely related to sustainable leadership since it seeks to sustain, protect, care, preserve and perpetuate quality of life. Sustainable leadership encourages individuals to think of the society holistically and recognizes interrelationships in all of creation.

Sustainable Leadership

We define sustainable leadership as the ability for individuals and institutions to continue to adapt and meet new challenges and complexities in demanding and changing contexts (Davies 2008; Hargreaves 2007). Sustainable leadership empowers others to improve human and resource capacity and provides opportunity for leaders and stakeholders to network, learn from, and support each other in achieving organizational goals for the future (Hargreaves 2007; Hargreaves and Fink 2006; Fullan 2001). Such leadership seeks to promote development and change for the better. Equipping African women leaders with leadership competencies is a strategy to help their organizations match the global needs as they seek to address challenges that face their society. Leadership development can empower women to create sustainable initiatives to support organizational structures and programs and encourage competencies for women to take on leadership positions while becoming active co-producers in their society.

Recent studies show that in nations where women are educated and take on positions outside the home, there are greater benefits towards the family and society (Bullogh 2008; Chisholm 2001; Eagly and Carli, 003). Following this line of thought, African women will need not only to work in the home but also to take on corporate responsibilities in institutions. Sikazwe (2006) in a study on developing women's leadership in rural communities, suggested that there is dire need for women to be more visible in their own development and be part of decision making processes. In this study, we focus on the learned leadership competencies to the subgroup of women religious. These women engage in humanitarian activities such as operating schools, health-care facilities, social welfare, programs, community outreach programs and pastoral care to the marginalized parts of East Africa. Little has been studied of this group of women (Salvaterra et al 2009; Wakahiu and Keller 2011), yet, increasing productivity in their organizations is imperative to increasing quality of life of the communities they serve. Studying the sustainable initiatives, lessons and implications of a specific leadership development program, the authors provide insights on ways to engage and encourage leadership competencies in the 180 participants in the program.

Re-visioning Leadership Paradigm for Women Religious

In Eastern Africa, Christian missionaries are acknowledged for introducing western education and culture through building schools, healthcare system, and social services (Sifuna and Otiende 1994; Chege and Sifuna 2006). However, not much was realized before independence in terms of educating women. In the 1960s Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania attained independence, thereby gaining autonomy to develop policies that would encourage education for all.

However, the policies that were designed then did not encourage education of girls. A handful of schools, initiated and run by missionaries enrolled some African girls whose families saw the value in educating their daughters. One of these few, Wangari Maathai (2006) who started the Green Belt Movement in Kenya and won the 2004 Nobel peace prize, explains her experience in grade school: “I grew very fond of the many sisters who helped shape my life” (136). Studies explicate the need for increasing higher education opportunities for women in East Africa, a vehicle through which they can fully participate in corporate and individual growth (Bloch and Tabachnic 1998; King and Hill 1998). Jackson (2004) suggests that social change results from a leadership that takes action and interacts with the needs and demands of local communities.

There are few studies on women religious from the West, who contributed much to education, healthcare, social services, and leadership development. Initially these missionaries represented western civilization and worked as teachers, nurses, and catechists. They encountered many challenges including tropical diseases, harsh climatic conditions, and cultural and linguistic problems. After years of struggle, they accepted educated African girls into the religious life. From the African perspectives, the African girls who entered religious life (congregations) were considered renegades because they forfeited their basic roles that included cultivating basic food, carrying water, and hauling firewood, contributing to the domestic economy, maintaining of the compound and, above all, carrying on the traditional norms of marriage (Martin 2009; Wakahiu and Keller 2011). Today, these women continue to struggle to address societal needs. For example, Martin Phyllis (2009), in the *Catholic Women of Congo-Brazzaville: Mothers and Sisters in Troubled Times*, provided a descriptive analysis of the struggle and challenges faced by women religious in an endeavor to provide human and basic needs to their people. Phyllis observed that these women encounter challenges in and endeavor to provide a healing presence to the poverty stricken, victims of rape, domestic violence, deprived and the suffering and vulnerable people. In addition, she argued that, not only are women religious leaders’ of organizations, but also, their motherhood is exhibited in their nurturing capacity – an essential quality for a leader. Also, their leadership is displayed in rebuilding the broken societal fabric by overseeing educational, health care, and social and pastoral care institutions. Anthropologist Joan Burke chronicles in *Catholic Sisters are All Mamas: Towards the Inculturation of the Sisterhood in Africa, an Ethnographical Study* that African women religious, due to the nature of their work, remain very much in touch with their people, particularly women and children. To succeed in providing quality services in their organizations learning leadership skills builds their capacity to effectively minister with and among the poor.

This paper discusses leadership in the context of the organizations managed by these women religious. A significant challenge in Eastern Africa is that some of these women have had minimal education or professional development that can lead to burnout. Furthermore, it makes it more challenging to break through organizational management, particularly during difficult economic meltdown. These women have limited resources to render efficient services. Consequently, enabling them with leadership, financial and project management competencies is imperative to revitalizing their organizations for future sustainability.

To date women religious of Africa play significant roles not only in the Church but also in the broader society. However, very little has been studied about their contribution to the economy, despite establishment of vital infrastructures such as schools, hospitals, and community programs. The authors describe the lessons, implications and sustainable initiatives created by these women after participating in a three-year leadership development program. These examples illustrate that given skills, women can create change and innovation that have a trickledown effect from their institutions to the larger society. In addition, the SLDI program studied here is a venture to increase leadership competencies in creating desired societal transformations to ensure sustainable initiatives. Such a program can facilitate the needed mental shift and awareness of the best practices in management and organizational performance.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to describe sustainable leadership strategies manifested in the ministries of women religious participants of a three-year leadership development program. The study also illustrates the experiences and transformation in their personal lives, their organizations and communities.

Theoretical Perspectives

The study is framed by *transformational leadership theory* (Bass 1985) that explains a process by which leaders involve stakeholders to create relational connections that raise their consciousness, self-interest and fullest potential to contribute to the organization. Transformational process encourages inclusion, motivates stakeholders and facilitates teamwork for change. The process activates leaders and team players to a high level of ethics, motivation and performance (Keller 1992; Avolio 1999). The underlying focus is “raising the team players’ level of awareness and enabling them to transcend their own self-interest for the good of the organization [and also] making them to aspire to attain higher-level needs” (Bass 1985, 20).

The team players develop their fullest potential to increase the organizational performance. Studies illustrate that the transformational leadership approach is well suited to tailoring essential elements of quality leadership to the organizations (Avolio, Bass and Jung 1999; Northouse 2004; Avolio 1999). The design and implementation of the SLDI program adopts a transformational model that raises the consciousness of the women religious to make informed decisions. These women will raise stakeholders' productivity and motivation through mentoring.

Methodology

To determine sustainable leadership strategies, lessons learned and implications of the leadership program, the authors employed qualitative case study methodology drawing from empirical data collected from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Case study was deemed essential because it is an "intensive, holistic analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit" (Merriam 2002, 34). Three participants, one from each of the three countries of East Africa, who had completed all five sessions in the three-year program, and had implemented the skills learned, and who had developed an extensive mentoring program, were selected to illustrate the effectiveness of the leadership program.

Design of the SLDI Program

The Sisters Leadership Development Initiative (SLDI) was a three-year Hilton-supported leadership program that involved 340 women religious in five countries namely Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Ghana, and Nigeria. It was initiated in 2007; women religious were enrolled in three core tracks relevant to the leadership need that included administration, financial and project management track. The program was designed with seven objectives delineated: (1) transfer knowledge and skills (2) encourage creative and effective practices (3) identify, mobilize resources (4) expand knowledge of development issues (5) enhance skills in human relations (6) develop skills in strategic planning, and (7) ensure sustainability of the projects. Training locations were selected and equipped with computer labs in each of the countries. Participants gathered in these locations for a total of four-weeks over a three-year period. On return to their workplaces, they implemented the action plans they had developed. Instructors were recruited from the United States, and East and West Africa. The mix provided varying perspectives to leadership styles, management, practices and cross-cultural perspectives. To assure sustainability of training and projects, a mentoring process was introduced at the onset of the program.

Data Collection

According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), the interviewer is the main instrument because that individual directs the interview process. The first author visited the interviewee sites in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania to conduct face-to-face interviews and to observe the skills practiced in their projects. Interviews were tape-recorded and the researcher took notes during the interview. The second author was one of several American instructors in the program and assisted in the analysis of the data collection.

Prior to the actual interview a pilot study was conducted to ascertain consistency and clarity of the interview questions. Then, four research questions were adopted to facilitate the interview process as follows: How clear and relevant were the leadership topics? In what ways did the classes/topics help you develop skills that related well to your ministry? In your opinion, what are some useful skills you gained from your being in the program? How did the skills you gained in the leadership program enable you to address the needs of the people and the general community you serve? Learning to mentor or help others you work with become leaders was part of the program; how did the lessons on mentoring help you to identify resources in your work? How did your being in the leadership training program change your leadership style and management in your ministry?

Three Case Illustrations

This study involves three women religious participants of a three-year leadership development program. These women held various leadership positions in their ministries allowing them to implement the skills they acquired in the training. The description of their work and use of the skills illustrates the meanings they attach to their experience in the leadership program, the sustainable initiatives they implemented, the lessons they learned, and the skills they transferred to their work settings to bring change.

Margaret (Kenya)

Margaret is 56 years and has been a woman religious for 30 years. She has served in various ministries including farm manager, teacher, and high school principal. At present she is the administrator of a complex that houses five institutions that include nursery, primary (elementary) and secondary schools, a dispensary and social welfare program. These institutions are located in the vicinity of a huge slum settlement in Nairobi. The complex offers the much needed programs and services to underprivileged persons. Margaret's major responsibility involves implementing institutional development programs, fundraising for these projects and executing the goals and objectives.

Although Margaret had been successful in the positions she had held in the previous years, she reported that she did not foresee how she would go about fundraising for the many needs and challenges of the institutions entrusted to her care without training in program management or fundraising. Margaret described the SLDI program as a “life changing training” because the skills she acquired allowed her to conduct needs assessment, fundraising and implementation of the projects that include sinking a borehole (well), building a water reservoir, a science laboratory, classrooms, a dormitory, and purchasing a corn gridding mill for the local community.

Marietta (Tanzania)

Marietta is a nurse and hospital director. She has vast experiences working at different hospitals in various countries. Currently, she is an administrator of a hospital that requires reconstruction, medical equipment, and water. She described her challenges: “the hospital was dilapidated, employees’ turnover was high which made it difficult to establish routines, the equipment was few and rundown, the water shortage made it difficult to maintain clean health hospital environment ... the people we serve are very poor and some cannot afford to pay, yet they need healthcare, and that is why I am here to help them ... the sad thing was when we referred the patients who have complications to specialized hospitals they [patients] did not go there, they went back home because they could not afford the cost [of transportation].” Marietta stated that her goal was to raise funds to provide specialized care for the sick and purchase the much needed equipment such as an ultrasound machine and caesarean kits to improve the maternity department. She paid tribute to the leadership development training because it provided sources for funding to improve conditions in the hospital. In addition, strategic planning, computer skills and resource management skills were important because through these skills, she was able to network and connect with funding organizations.

Susan (Uganda)

Susan is a trained accountant and has worked as a school bursar for eight years, a hospital accountant for four years and now as financial administrator in her congregation. Her responsibilities include sourcing for funds, for ministerial advancement, management of institutional property that includes farms, good production, health care facilities and social welfare. She described her biggest challenge as providing food for the schools her congregation manages particularly in rural areas, inner cities and in arid, poverty-stricken regions. She elaborates that being in the leadership development training provided a new perspective. The knowledge and skills that she acquired provided her with channels to enlist the community in fundraising initiatives and improve community farming strategies for greater yield. As a result, jobs became available for the residents, improved farming methods increased crop yields, and with training, local people improved their living conditions.

Discussion

Three major themes emerged from the data: (1) sustainable leadership (2) mentoring and (3) project development. The participants in the three case studies integrated the knowledge and skills into their programs to create innovative projects that would help alleviate the social, economic, cultural and ecological issues in their societies. Throughout their three years in the leadership program, they implemented several projects from initiating creative and innovative social programs, mentoring staff and co-workers on leadership competencies, implementing best leadership practices such as teambuilding, grant writing, networking, and conflict resolution to improving existing programs for unwed mothers and street families, caring for orphans, and improving schools and health care programs.

The participants credited the leadership training for empowering them with competencies to build up positive attitudes and the ability to make informed and consultative decisions and act upon these decisions to alter their projects with greater efficiency. To illustrate the magnitude of the innovative projects and their assertiveness in bringing about transformation, Margaret stated:

I am a principal in a school that enrolls 600 boarding students and most of them are from poor families in the slum area ... using the skills I gained in the training I wrote several grant proposals locally and abroad to construct classrooms, a science laboratory, a dormitory, a borehole, and a grinding mill ... a grant of \$57,692 to construct a science laboratory and two classrooms and equipped with chairs and desks ... another grant \$25,640 helped in sinking a borehole, building a reservoir and piping water into the buildings. Another grant for building a boys dormitory and completion of the laboratory at a cost of about \$47,435 and another for gridding mill and housing it at a total cost of \$38,460.

Acquisition of knowledge and skills enhanced the trainees' competencies for individual growth as leaders and encouraged the use of responsible leadership insights in their ministries. Susan a financial administrator elaborated on the efficacy SLDI:

I attribute my ability to bring change to my workplace to the training. The financial manual I developed as a guideline in financial management has been very helpful to all the bursars in our projects; now there is a procedure on budgeting, expenditure, internal controls ... before the training I could not tell how much money we had or the value of our property ... now I am banking all the money before I use it and I am able to track expenditures ... this has brought a huge change in planning future projects.

Perhaps the strongest evidence of sustainable leadership was the initiatives the trainees implemented. For example, major transformations in pursuing projects included systematic fundraising to construct schools, improving medical services, and purchasing relevant medical equipment. Marietta declared that “Grant writing skills enabled me to methodically seek funds to expand buildings, provide a generator in schools where there is no electricity, equip classrooms with desks and books, and improve farming for better productivity.” Providing education and educational facilities to accommodate higher enrollment in schools was an essential strategy to ensure human and social capital sustainability.

Networking is essential for an organization to learn from others. Sustainability is ensured in the eagerness and determination of the trainees to network and consult each other on ways to solve problems in their organizations and communities. Marietta described her excitement:

We have organized meetings and we already have a bank account for the group ... with the money we can meet and plan on how to go about training other sisters ... there are still a few things we need to discuss ... we are in good communication through email, texting and telephone calls ... we need to raise enough money for the alumni launching.

Networking is now seen as an essential component in educating other women to find ways to support themselves. However, sustainable effects cannot be realized overnight. Hargreaves (2007) affirms that, “sustainability asks for patience and endurance in implementation of change, it calls for prudence and resourcefulness rather than energetic and profligate investment, it promotes virtue to conserve the past in a world awash with innovation and change” (225).

Mentoring

The Sisters Leadership Development Initiatives program incorporated a mentoring process as a major sustainability strategy. Mentoring refers to “a relationship between an older or more experienced mentor and a younger, less experienced protégé for the purpose of helping and developing the protégé’s career” (Ragins and Kram 2007, 5). According to the SLDI program requirement, each trainee was to mentor three co-workers. However, Marietta, Susan and Margaret mentored 18 people and conducted seminars for more than 72 staff and co-workers, thereby, disseminating knowledge and skills to more people. Margaret illustrates:

I mentored five people on communication, facilitation, teambuilding strategies, rules for conducting meetings, delegation and facilitation skills, grant writing, and project planning ... my mentees chose the skills in which they wanted to be trained from the notes and handouts I provided ... [It] was so encouraging, we reflected on how we had been doing things ... the skills were important to the mentees as teachers, particularly to communicate to co-workers and establishing routines, teamwork, conducting meetings, drawing memos, and developing agenda.

Through mentoring, the participants and their mentees developed self-confidence. Mentoring relationships centered on increasing the mentees' capacity in two ways: first, career development and second, psychosocial support. Career functions involve increasing mentees' exposure and capacity to carry out their duties efficiently while psychosocial functions involve work performance, increasing self-efficacy, providing friendships, as well as personal and professional growth (Baron and Morin 2009). The relationship between mentors and mentees are instrumental in disseminating the skills required to improve education, health facilities, and social services and indeed, endowed more people with knowledge and skills through facilitating seminars in their work places.

Although mentoring is widely used in developed nations, to the trainees it was a relatively new concept. Interviewees described how they practiced mentoring, Marietta, describes:

Mentoring was a new concept for us; though we have used similar strategies to support colleagues in work, we did not call it mentoring. In the leadership program, we were required to follow a formal mentoring process ... there was structure to train and coach the mentees in the skills we had learned ... this helped me to read and understand the concepts because I was to teach the same skills to my mentee, I needed to understand and practice.

The participants in SLDI value mentoring as a technique designed to ensure stability and sustainability. They endeavored not only to produce good results and increase productivity but also to empower their mentees and co-workers to practice good leadership skills they saw modeled by their mentors. Susan described the mentoring effect as follows:

I want to continue involving more mentees in the knowledge and skills I acquired in the training ... I have incorporated the materials into the staff seminars to encourage professional development - concepts about ethical leadership, stewardship, communication, teambuilding, facilitation and conflict resolution strategies ... I am still mentoring and conducting seminars to staff and community.

Mentoring provided these women with an opportunity to become enablers, peer supporters, motivators and encouragers to stimulate mentees' and co-workers' resourcefulness. As a result, numerous benefits were cited as emanating from individual mentoring and group seminars. Marietta stated: "I cannot underestimate leadership and teambuilding skills ... I have recognized the importance of teamwork; my level of communication and public speaking has greatly improved." And Susan reinforced: "The skills helped me in my work to serve better and recognize talents in my colleagues [also] they provided self-knowledge and competencies that I often use ... I am there to guide in the project implementation." Such statements illustrate that leadership competencies can trickle down through mentoring to the staff and co-workers in an organization creating quality management practices that promote success. The mentors became more self-confident and pushed harder to understand the concept so that they could turn around and share the knowledge with others. The sisters that were mentored felt part of the program even though they were not attending the program and they felt enriched.

Projects development

Sustainable leadership is a concept that encourages shared responsibility to encourage human and financial resource improvement. It is self-sustaining because leaders recognize the need for change and community involvement to ensure growth. Measurable social and economic gains were reported that created indelible marks on the trainees and their communities. By enabling the trainees to become more confident in pursuing grant funding to address the needs of their people, these women were able establish their own niche as people who have a capacity to transform their society. Susan descriptively explained initiatives and changes realized in the projects;

There is positive progress in what we are doing around the farm because the training gave me a lot more confidence in the day-to-day decisions, and thinking about the future of the farm and how better planning would increase yield and investment returns ... we have been able to refocus and I think now we are heading in the right direction. The farm projects include coffee growing, cattle rearing, poultry, and piggery. Instructors gave us challenging thoughts and an action plan that has made me become a better planner and implementer ... it gave me a little more encouragement.

Individual change of perspectives is the first step to an inner transformational journey to self-discovery that resulted through participation in leadership development. The three women explained that they were able to unlearn leadership tendencies they had considered valuable and take on more responsible leadership skills that informed their decisions, skills such as building teams, initiating strategic plans, improving communication channels and implementing motivational strategies. Marietta explained the change:

The course gave me new ideas, it gave me confidence, I have the ability to do more and in a better way than I used to because of the leadership knowledge ... I am a very strong introvert so I always thought leaders had to be extroverts ... now I know I do not have to become talkative to be a leader but just plan and do what I know to do as a leader.

In addition, Margaret elaborated:

I would say definitely it did. I am a new leader with new perspectives ... I do believe that we left the training with a lot more confidence. I see leadership in a lot of different formats, not just the high-profile, so in that respect I think it has changed me and certainly I am changing my workplace.

The internal change of perspective was evident in positive project development the trainees implemented. Funds raised by the trainees were used for various projects including sinking a borehole (well) which not only provides the greatly needed clean water for the community but also saves time and energy for women and girls who otherwise would be trekking for miles and for hours to fetch water. The social and economic benefits evident in the trainees' service to the poor are in themselves lasting effects of the program, changing the lifestyle for many through employment in grinding mills, schools, hospitals and bakery among other projects. In addition, these projects made it possible to purchase an ambulance for outreach clinics, improve farming methods to increase productivity, and increasing skills development for youths in a garment and catering center. All these indicate lasting effects that bring change, improve life and encourage self-reliance in their communities. Susan described her undertakings as follows:

We encourage rotating savings programs to unwed slum mothers so as to sustain themselves ... the microfinance program provided to unwed mothers \$45 each as initial capital to create a small enterprise; 30 slum mothers are in the program and have initiated their small businesses that include selling vegetables and fish, and 17 of them have repaid the loan which we have provided to another set of 17 needy women.

Trainees adapted their new leadership styles, developed strategic plans for future projects, obtained computers and learned to use the internet to improve communication, service delivery and networking. Other projects were similarly financed by various organizations outside of Africa. Evidence of accountability was provided to the Hilton Foundation for its funding of the leadership program.

Conclusion

Findings illustrate that leadership development can be a fundamental strategy to cultivate leadership competencies in women in developing countries. Research studies demonstrate a positive relationship exists between quality leadership, institutional effectiveness and personnel performance (Avolio 1999; Hill 2003). Furthermore, findings in a study conducted with 300 participants in an *InterAction* leadership program in 19 countries in Africa revealed that participants developed clarity about leadership, and the process helped to reverse bad leadership practices and encouraged useful qualities (Bolden and Kirk 2005). According to a study conducted in Malaysia, Hassan and Silong (2008) established that although women face cultural, economics, and social barriers in leading communities, as leaders, they have acquired the skills that have brought positive change in community development and play a vital role in establishing and maintaining important relationships and networks in their communities. In the same vein, empowering the women religious of Eastern Africa to recognize their roles in bringing change in their societies is the first step of transformation and enables women to actively contribute to their organizations and society. To unweave the mental models of the individual, cultural, social and economic barriers that women have encountered, leadership development is imperative in increasing productivity, self-efficacy and ensuring individual and organizational development. The leadership competencies acquired in the SLDI program indicated that participants were energized to participate in encouraging change, innovation, and educational and social progress.

The participants expressed that the new knowledge and skills they gained were practiced in their institutions. Participating in the leadership development program encouraged change that creates lasting effects on individual trainees and communities. In addition, the participants developed new ways of perceiving themselves as leaders and adopted new leadership styles in the management of their organizations. This is consistent with Kegan's (1994, 76) notion of how people create a personal reality or self-authorship by "internally coordinating beliefs, values, and interpersonal loyalties". The SLDI program enabled trainees to adopt new ways, values and beliefs in themselves as leaders who can create change in their ministries.

The voices of the three women participants in this study suggest that leadership development is an essential and worthwhile investment to encourage sustainable leadership among women religious. Although the sample was too small to generalize the findings to the entire women population, the effects of the program as revealed by these women point out that leadership development can increase human and resource management skills for women to become leaders, increase productivity in their organizations and to ensure job creation for progress. Stromquist (2002) argued that skills development is essential for human development and sustains social and economic growth. In addition, these women initiated programs and projects that illustrate sustainable strategies for growth in their communities and society. Also, the participants willingly changed their managerial styles and took on new leadership styles that were more effective. As a result, transformation was evident in their organizations with initiatives that encouraged sustainable plans by attracting resources through fundraising and grant writing.

Mentorship encouraged the mentors and mentees to engender a new level of discourse in organizational management; mentees adapted the skills and together with the mentors became change agents. In addition, the skills learned and mentored increased the stakeholders' self-efficacy and individual and professional growth to render meaningful services. Also, the study revealed that the women participants used the knowledge and skills they acquired to initiate development projects and improved existing programs. Consequently, huge benefits were reported that included individual, community, organizational and society impacts. In this view, leadership development can be strategy relevant to build relevant competencies in the women in the East Africa so that they can partake in policy development.

In view of our complex dynamic society, this study concludes that sustainable leadership is imperative for development to occur and to ensure progress and improvement of personnel, and an increase in women participation in the decision-making process for future existence of organizations. This study also found that leadership skills are needed to enhance managerial competencies and organization performance for women in leadership. Specifically, this study revealed that leadership development might be a valid investment, not only for women in the Eastern Africa, but also for all organizational leaders to help transition their organizations to compete in a global market. Therefore, this study recommends more leadership development programs to empower women of Eastern Africa to help transform their society to match global trends.

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