

EXPLORING HOW FEMALE LEADERS' ENTRY INTO LEADERSHIP ROLES CONTRIBUTES TO THEIR PERSONAL PROCESS OF EMPOWERMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF DAR ES SALAAM

Zainab Athuman Janguo¹, Eugenia Joseph Kafanabo² and Rob Hess³

¹Department of Educational Foundation, Management, and Lifelong Learning (EFMLL),

²Department of Educational Psychology, and Curriculum Studies (EPCS),

³Grand Canyon University (GCU), School of Education, United States of America

Corresponding author¹ E-mail: janguozainab@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the experiences of the leadership entry process of women at the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), Tanzania. The main aim of the study was to gain some insights on the process of leadership formation, gender issues and the emergence of confidence and empowerment at the early stage of entry into high level leadership position in higher learning institutions. A phenomenological research approach was employed in order to explore and understand individuals lived experiences of women leaders. In this case, twelve female academic leaders in different colleges, schools and departments who were purposively selected and data were collected through in-depth interviews and documentary reviews, and analysed thematically. The findings showed that personal competence, academic qualifications, mentorship, institutional opportunity structures, and timing had a combination shaped leadership entry pathway of the women. It is concluded that in UDSM, female academic leadership is influenced by the combination of personal agency, institutional policy support and gender. The study recommends improved mentorship programs, professional development programs, and work-life balance policies for women in UDSM and other higher institutions in Africa to increase equitable access to leadership positions.

Keywords: Female Academic Leadership, University of Dar es Salaam, Gender and Leadership, Mentorship and Empowerment, and Higher Education in Tanzania.

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender equality is a key priority issue in the world that is entrenched in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, notably SDG number 5, which focuses on the empowerment of women, and SDG number 4, which focuses on inclusive and equitable education. These international resolutions indicate that gender inequalities in universities and leadership also have to be resolved, and the opinion that women's empowerment significantly increases their contribution to national development initiatives is substantiated (United Nations, 2022). Equally, the regional and international conventions like Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women [CEDAW] expect nations, including Tanzania, to do away with discrimination and facilitate the representation of women in political and social institutions (UN Women, 2020). Higher education institutions have an important role to play in developing these

objectives by facilitating access, participation, and leadership among women (Ademe & Singh, 2015).

As a concept that can be perceived as a process whereby people gain a sense of agency, confidence, and control over life choices, empowerment is the one that has been widely discussed over decades (Bachilula et al., 2022). In the case of women, empowerment is the acquisition of self-value, increasing the scope of choices, and breaking the boundaries of the system created by the social and institutional environment (Chinaelo & Regina, 2022). Women empowerment in the university context is a highly personalized experience when it comes to female leaders who have to deal with the requirements of gender and assertive power in complicated organisational settings. This is in line with the scholarship that defines women as collaborative and transformative in leadership as opposed to the traditional male-dominated cultures of leadership (Hamed Taherdoost, 2022).

Although women have been more involved in academia in every corner of the world, there is a disproportionately low representation of women in top-level leadership (Tarimo & Swai, 2024). Research studies in Africa indicate that women in the academia frequently face obstacles in the form of limited access to some of the leadership positions, mentorship from colleagues or proper leadership programmes, implicit bias, male-dominated networks, and patriarchal institutional cultures, which made it hard to climb the career ladder (Shemahonge & Malingumu, 2022). Policy changes in Tanzania like the National Strategy of Gender Development and the updated Higher Education Policy (2023) shows the importance of gender equality and encourage such programs as mentorship and leadership training among females. In the same manner, the Higher Education Gender Policy (2017) urges higher education institutions to create gender desks and reinforce the mechanisms of combating discrimination (United Nations, 2022). Nevertheless, there are still gaps of implementation, especially in the leadership of large universities.

At the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), the thematic aspects of gender equity have enhanced the representation of women in the academic community but not in the top-level positions like the office of a dean, director, and deputy vice-chancellor (Nyoni & He, 2019; Kyando & Shemahonge, 2023). It has been observed that the issue of male dominated cultures in leadership, lack of mentorship opportunities and underestimation of women leadership styles still hinder the progress of women (Tarimo & Swai, 2020). Despite the fact that institutional policies promote gender equality, a significant number of female leaders tell that they feel isolated in decision-making areas and they have difficulties in balancing between academic lives and meeting societal demands (Correa et al., 2022). This gap between policy targets and lived realities emphasises deeper structural and cultural limitations that go beyond issues of access.

The existing literature in Tanzania has mainly concentrated on gender representation in addition to the leadership experiences in a broader sense (Nyoni and He, 2019). Nevertheless, the individual process of empowerment the internal and subjective process on the basis of which female leaders acquire agency, is the under-researched issue. Learning this mechanism is the key to the development of interventions that would not only contribute to the entry of women into leadership but also their ability to succeed in it. This study fills this gap through a discussion of how female leaders at UDSM develop and perish empowerment as guided by the Model of Personal Empowerment by Kieffer (1984). This article was aimed to review how the role of women entering leadership positions helped them to become empowered as individuals in the traditional male-dominated academic setting.

Research Questions

This study explored female leaders' entry into leadership roles contributes to their personal process of empowerment at the University of Dar es Salaam. Specifically, the study sought to answer one main question:

- i. How female leaders' entry into leadership roles contributes to their personal process of empowerment at the UDSM?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical literature review: Kieffer's Personal Empowerment Model

The Personal Empowerment Model by Kieffer, (1984) gives the theoretical basis of this study since empowerment is key to the way women can be promoted to leadership positions. Kieffer developed the model based on the qualitative research conducted in the United States and the researcher explored the movement of powerless individuals to the socio-political trainees by joining the community organisations. The analysis of 15 participants also demonstrated that he finds empowerment to be a developmental process throughout their life and is influenced by learning, reflection, and interaction with social structures. Kieffer viewed empowerment as a continuous process rather than an event that individuals acquire confidence, competence, and their influence on their respective environments.

Kieffer identified four sequential stages of empowerment:

- i. **Era of Entry:** Individuals initially experience powerlessness or threats to self-interest that trigger the need for change. This stage involves early awareness of social norms and authority structures.
- ii. **Era of Advancement:** Individuals gain mentorship, develop analytical skills, and build confidence through dialogue, problem-solving, and skill acquisition.
- iii. **Era of Incorporation:** Individuals begin applying leadership and political skills to confront structural barriers and assert agency.
- iv. **Era of Commitment:** Empowered individuals sustain activism, mentor others, and apply their competencies to long-term social and personal goals.

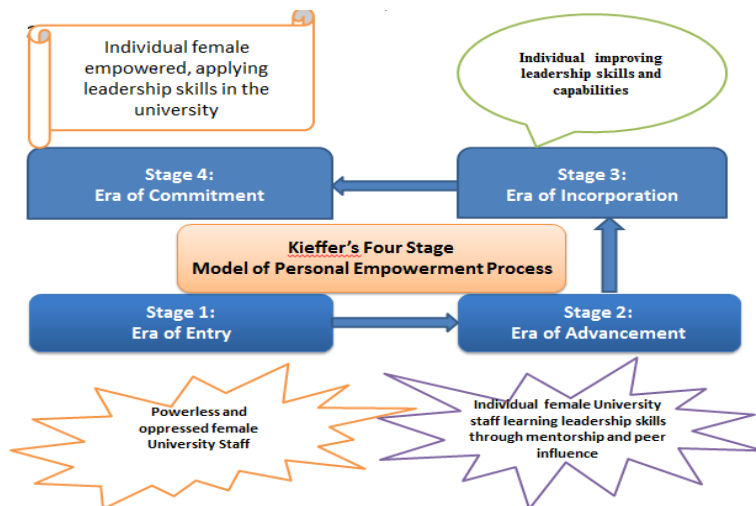


Figure 1: Personal Empowerment Process (Adapted from Kieffer's 1984)

The model is very applicable to the analysis of the way female leaders of the University of Dar es Salaam build empowerment by using their personal experiences. According to leadership studies, empowerment and leadership are two processes that are connected to each other (Bisung & Dickin, 2019; Barrios et al., 2020). Kieffer developmental lens is consistent with the focus of this study on how women negotiate cultural expectations, institutional aspects and gender expectations to achieve leadership positions.

As per the recent literature, the model provided by Kieffer can be used to assess personal empowerment (Okech et al., 2020; Heuscher, 2020). The model has been lamented as being linear, not contextualised enough, and prone to ignore the sociopolitical complexities (Carr, 2003), but nonetheless, it is one of the most empirically based models of comprehending the process of empowerment. In addition, its application in modern research, including the work by Hammond-Graf (2021) on women athletes, shows its flexibility in situations and groups. The four stages outlined by Kieffer in this work have presented a systematic framework through which women lived experience at higher institutions in Africa could be interpreted. The model aids in shedding light on the way female leaders identify the obstacles of gender, how they develop the skills of leadership, how they use the agency in the patriarchal academic context, and ultimately how they invest in mentoring others and promoting gender-inclusive leadership in higher education in Tanzania.

Empirical literature review

During the entry stage, there is a self-interest direct threat that helps individuals to trigger the process of empowerment. It is the first attempt to research authority and social norms. This stage is dominated by powerlessness (Kieffer, 1984), which is characterised by the fact that era of entry is dominated by barriers. The personal narratives of women leaders on the obstacles they faced on their way to becoming empowered in the proposed study will play a central role in developing empirical data that will help close the gap in gender disparity in leadership offices in Tanzania, Africa. In addition, it is important to focus on the identification of those obstacles to comprehend the problems faced by women in the process of becoming empowered in Tanzania. Assessing the degree of the research gap is significant by reviewing academic studies where their authors put emphasis on the obstacles women have to overcome in order to become empowered. Therefore, this part of the literature review contains references to the research on barriers/challenges that women encounter in their paths to occupying leadership roles in the university.

Globally, women are fighting to have such a voice in the direction of their nations. In African countries, women are not an exception, and they have been encountered with numerous challenges that have in fact empowered their determination (Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021). Despite the gains that women have realised in being recognised as leaders, there still exist huge gaps between them and the men. An analysis that evaluated the proportion of women in different academic ranks and determines the significant elements that contribute to advancing in the profession established that gender equality in senior and managerial positions remains far-fetched and that the views of challenges encountered by women in academia that include work-life balance issues and role models remain unchanged across the different regions and cultures (Correa et al., 2025).

Bachilula et al. (2022) examined the lived leadership experiences of women leaders in the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) and the State University of Zanzibar (SUZA). The research design used was phenomenology and 31 participants were used in the study. The semi-structured interviews and the documentary review were used to produce data. According to the study results,

the hurdles that led to becoming a leader include loopholes in university policies, guidelines and leadership, university charters, and the attributes of leadership that were stated. It also emerged that the strategies that women employed to stay in the leadership positions in the university were leadership capacity-building, self-efficacy and self-esteem and accountability. The conclusion of this study is that women leaders undergo a labyrinth on their journey to be and stay as leaders. The study suggests that university managements ought to support providing leadership capacity developing initiatives, with the aid of favourable policy settings in order to support the development of women leaders.

Ahmed (2021) conducted a mix of literature review and document analysis technique as a qualitative research study to explore barriers of women achieving senior academic leadership positions in Ethiopia found that women are indeed underrepresented in the senior academic leadership positions of universities because of personal, institutional, and socio-cultural factors. In Tanzania, Mutarubukwa and Mazana (2017) concluded that in Tanzania, women are not different from men and the existing gender inequalities are not influenced by sex but rather are socially constructed. The empirical studies in East and Southern Africa have increasingly documented the underrepresentation of women in leadership, despite their rising academic qualifications. For instance, Ceylan & Mnzile (2025) emphasize that even where formal qualifications are comparable, female academics are held back by organisational culture, maledominated mentorship systems, and leadership models that favour masculine norms. In Uganda and Kenya, similar concerns have been raised regarding the lack of career guidance, exposure to leadership roles, and support for women balancing professional and domestic obligations (Muriithi et al., 2018).

Similarly, to the above study, which disclosed the barriers by women in the position of academic leaders, Hirsu et al. (2021) reported the barriers that influence women researchers within academic institutions work life balance particularly with regard to child care or domestic chores and professional norms. Furthermore, in a phenomenological study examining the experiences of women in leadership roles in a higher education institution in South-Eastern Nigeria, Chinaelo and Regina (2022) found that participants had their positive and problematic experiences working as women in leadership roles in Michael Opara University. Moreover, the research also established that, culture, gender roles, lack of education/training, and family issues remained as variables that weakened the role of women into becoming leaders at the institution. Therefore, this study sought to explore how female leaders' entry into leadership roles contributes to their personal process of empowerment at the University of Dar es Salaam.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research approach and design

The research approach used in this study was qualitative phenomenological research approach where the researcher aimed at exploring the lived experience and the meaning people had attached to it. Phenomenology was an appropriate methodology since the research would explore the experiences of female leaders in UDSM regarding their empowerment processes and how they circumvented the institutional systems. The chosen approach, which is common in researches on the experiences of women in leadership (Kane, 2023; Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021), helped the researcher to understand the nature of the phenomenon, personal empowerment.

Area of study

This study was conducted at University of Dar es Salaam, the oldest and the most prominent institution of higher learning in Tanzania. UDSM has been traditionally involved in the intellectual life of the country and instigated a number of reforms associated with gender-related issues (Mukangara, 1995; Mukangara & Shao, 2007). Its gender equity commitment ensured that it was a perfect place to study the empowerment careers of old age female leaders.

Sample size and sampling procedures

Given the nature of the study, the sample size involved twelve (12) female leaders at UDSM which included the Deputy Vice Chancellor, Principals, Deans, Directors and Heads of Departments. These groups described women who have direct leadership duties and whose perspectives were essential to comprehend the process of empowerment.

The study employed purposive sampling method to identify twelve senior female leaders by determining leadership criteria that they qualified. The purposive sampling method was suitable due to the inclusion of participants with pertinent experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The participants provided information via interviews and the review of documentary.

Table 1: Sample Distribution of Female Leaders

Institution	Targeted Senior Women Leaders	Population	Sample size
UDSM	Vice Chancellor	0	0
UDSM	Deputy Vice-Chancellor	1	1
UDSM	College Principals	4	2
UDSM	Deans	6	2
UDSM	Directors	8	2
UDSM	Heads of Departments	16	5
Total		36	12

Data collection methods

Data for this study were gathered through in-depth interviews. The in-depth interviews facilitated an in-depth examination of the experience of the participants, which makes possible flexibility of probing and an extensive narrative production (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020; Hamed, 2022). Data collection procedures were recorded and the scholars in qualitative research were consulted.

Data analysis

The transcription of data was done using zoom application while thematic analysis was done with the help of MAXQDA software version 24. The analysis was based on a six-step framework by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with data, initial codes creation, themes search, theme review, scope definition and naming, and final analytical report creation. It was done in a way that guaranteed a systematic, rigorous and transparent interpretation of narratives of the participants.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**Journey into the First Academic Leadership Position**

The experiences of the participants as they take their first steps into the field of academic leadership at UDSM also reflect a combination of a slow progression in careers and was given an appointment based on the necessities of the institution. An example is given in the case of Participant 1 where she presented in the chronological order of the events that:

"I initially served as the coordinator of postgraduate studies... eventually; I rose to the position of Principal of the College" for anonymity use only college is enough..." (Interview with Participant 1, November, 2025).

This narrative shows that women at UDSM are often given the opportunity to serve at departmental level as way to prepare them for the entry into leadership. While in the position of coordinator for postgraduate, the women would have learnt leadership skills and develop require competence to lead. On the contrary, Participant 6 emphasised the sudden entrance after the completion of her PhD:

"I had just returned from my PhD... the administration invited me to help establish a new Department of Food Science and Technology that I willingly did and it has taken off the ground" (Interview with Participant 6, November 2025).

This story implies that the career trajectories of leadership are influenced by the relationships between individual skills, occupational preparation, and organisational need. Inductively, the data indicates that the institutional opportunity structures, including departmental requirements or new program establishment, are essential in facilitating the entry of new leadership positions. These results deductively show that the development of leadership is not an individual issue but it is achieved within the frame of academic hierarchy and time (Tarimo & Swai, 2024). In general, the experience of the participants suggests that the preparation and the requirement according UDSM leadership structure and requirement. For example, a candidate to assume the position of a DVC or VC has to be a professor and to be a principle or Dean, one has to be a Senior Lecturer and above. Moreover, these positions undergo thorough scrutiny through search teams which are appointed by the DVC Academic, approved by SENATE and Council and latter vetted by the Ethics Committee in the Ministerial level.

Factors Influencing Attainment of Leadership Roles

Personal ambition was not among the key factors in the process of acquiring leadership position; the most common factors among them were qualification, experience, and mentorship across the participants. Only participant 2 noted the importance of mentorship:

"Mentorship experience was real in the AWARD program... that training provided me with tools... that helped me step into leadership" (Interview with Participant 2, November 2025).

Equally, Participant 12 emphasised the importance of reputation and competence:

"My educational qualification and professional competence prepared the ground, but my work ethic... made the final difference" (Interview with Participant 12, November 2025).

Inductively, mentorship through program design for women development such as AWARD were found to be determining factors enabling women to develop skills, guidance and confidence to manage leadership issues. This implies that a female focus program aimed at enhancing leadership in women can help in closing the gap between the perceived readiness and demonstrated competence, particularly in male dominated academic settings. These experiences, deductively, can be used to corroborate organisational role acquisition theories, indicating that the awareness

of senior personnel, combined with career qualifications, deems that a person can be leaders more than just their desire to be leaders (Chinaelo & Regina, 2022).

Gender-Related Challenges

This section presents gender-related challenges they faced to enter leadership. Only two (participant 2 and 5) narrated their stories in that direction as the experienced some slight interference to slight resistance and social role demands. Firstly, participant 5 remarked that:

"I did not experience specific gender-based challenges. Gender did not play a major role in how I was treated or how I perceived myself. However, I do recognize that being a woman may have shaped my empathetic and collaborative leadership style..." (Interview with Participant 5, November 2025).

This showcases where leadership barriers were largely logistical or institutional rather than gendered. Conversely, Participant 2 observed that:

"Opposition in the departmental and college meetings often felt gendered; some male colleagues would resist proposals for the sake of opposing" (Interview with Participant 2, November 2025).

These illustrating subtle forms of discrimination, inductively, the aspect of professional duty and personal life came to the fore as a common recurrent theme with emphasis made on the gendered aspect of leadership that transcends the form of barriers. They usually required the participants to apply extra effort, proving their increased competence against the gendered assumptions. These experiences are deductively consistent with the theory of social roles in leadership, suggested by Eagly's, which is that social expectation of women affects how they are perceived to have management potential (Bandura, 1997). The statistics show that the path of women to leadership does not only entail going through the institutional routes but also dealing with culturally bound expectations. Notably, the narratives of the participants indicate that resilience, persistence, and strategic adaptation are the key skills to overcoming obstacles arising because of gender, as they should stress that empowerment is a social process and an individual process at the same time.

Support and Hindrance in Leadership Entry

This section provides information on support and hindrance in leadership entry. The key to successful entry into leadership was mentorship and institutional sponsorship of participants. Participant 3 mused that:

"I identified a former Director who had excelled in the same role as my mentor... She guided me for seven years on entry and successful leadership performance" (Interview with Participant 3, November 2025).

This emphasising the long-term influence of mentorship, the help was often provided by senior female colleagues and active institutional leaders who saw potential and competence. Nonetheless, it was not only the case with formal opposition; as Participant 2 mentioned:

"Some individuals campaigned informally against my election; they were going office to office to urge people not to vote for me" (Interview with Participant 2, November 2025).

Through inductive evidence, the results indicate that social networks and personal relationship in the institution are the most important mediators of leadership success, particularly in the case of female academics. These results can be deductively correlated with the concept of the organisational social capital, according to which the access to influential sponsors and mentors can

counterbalance the structural obstacles. The data also indicate that the effective leadership support has many-sided nature, encouragement, advocacy, and practical guidance. These experiences, on the whole, suggest that the processes of leadership trajectories are negotiated both within institutional processes and within social mechanisms, and supportive networks and mentorship can empower leaders.

Gender's Role in Shaping Initial Leadership Experience

Gender influenced leadership experiences of the participants was not so much in terms of denying access but, rather, in terms of the perceptions and expectations. Participant 10 pointed out that:

"Men of my age group didn't face such scrutiny... I had to adjust my appearance and approach, not to conform, but to be perceived as professional and capable" (Interview with Participant 10, November 2025).

Some of the most commonly used strategies by the participants included working overtime, proving their exceptional competence and juggling between household duties as a response to gendered assumptions. Inductively, these strategies unravel that women are dynamic and take the initiative to negotiate professional credibility in male dominated spaces, in most cases redefining the expectations of leadership with the act of performance. Inductively, these experiences can be linked to the empowerment and gender schema theories and concepts, as these theories underscore the importance of gender awareness based on the strategic behavior and self-presentation of leadership, and the identity of leadership itself (Hirsu et al., 2021). The participants also emphasised that their gendered experience supported advocacy, mentoring and inclusion programs among other women implying a more social change. On the whole, gender, besides influencing the perception of the participants towards their work environment, also influenced the adaptive strategies, professional behaviour, and leadership style, reinforcing the intersection of individual agency and structural limitations.

Confidence and Empowerment from Early Leadership Experiences

The participants were greatly empowered and increased their confidence due to early leadership experiences, which dictated the path to greater responsibility. Participant 8 said that:

"Initially, I had little confidence, but as I took on roles... I grew more self-assured" (Interview with Participant 8, November 2025).

This illustrates the impact of early mastery experiences. Participant 1 similarly emphasised that competence and research performance translated into leadership credibility:

"My empowerment came from research performance and professional excellence" (Interview with Participant 1, November 2025).

Inductively, physical accomplishments, mentoring, peer support and institutional recognition were suggested to be key factors in women empowerment in academic leadership. Deductively, these results support original Bandura (1997) self-efficacy theory, which postulates that mastery experiences, vicarious learning, and social persuasion are all-powerful in building confidence and motivation. Moreover, the stories of the participants signify that overcoming initial obstacles and becoming resilient creates a sense of professional identity, which enhances the feeling of right to become a leader. In general, the initial experiences acted as a source of continued empowerment and established the fact that the belief in leadership is cumulative, socially mediated, and strongly connected with performance and recognition.

The results and discussion are relevant to the discourse of gender and leadership in higher education as they provide insights into institutional change and empowering women as leaders in the academia. Gender-related issues were subtle resistance, gendered expectations, and balancing work and family roles that necessitated adaptive methods such as portraying great competence and use of support network. The initial leadership experiences were very effective in boosting self-confidence and professional empowerment which instilled the willingness to perform more demanding roles. Though formal ambition was not the foremost factor, institutionalised directions, career image, and experience in the work environment allowed women to navigate in the leadership positions successfully.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study has investigated the experiences of entry and initial leadership of women scholars in the University of the University of Dar es Salaam where the connection between personal competence, institutional organisation, and gendered expectations could be displayed. The results showed that the leadership tracks were determined by their gradual developmental role through administrative duties and appointments which were abrupt and in line with the needs of the institution. Although personal drive to lead was not a primary factor, the qualifications, work experience, mentoring, and recognition in the institution were decisive factors that allowed women to take up leadership positions. The issues of gender were equally evident but also different in their degree, with subtle resistance and gender expectations as well as a necessity to juggle professional and family life. The adaptive mechanisms reduce the effects of gendered barriers in the strategies of the participants to prove their competence, work longer hours, and find mentorship. The experiences in early leadership went a long way in enhancing the confidence of the participants, their empowerment and their sense of identity, and helped them undertake greater responsibilities with strength and vision.

The findings advocate that the universities should formalise the mentorship programs and professional development initiatives that are designed specifically to women whereby competency and potential are seen regardless of the gender. Subtle gender-biased policies and work-life balance should be proactively promoted in the institutional policies that would minimise the obstacles to leadership involvement. Also, the establishment of organised access to early-academic scholars to leadership exposure will build confidence and skills, which will support a culture of equitable access to leadership. Future studies ought to examine the long-term effect of such interventions on retention and performance of leaders, and this study ought to examine the role of mediating variables, including the organisational culture and peer networks. In sum, this study show that academic women leader succeeds in areas of personal agency, institutional resource, and navigation gendered expectations, and demonstrates the ways to empower individuals and the ways to reform institutions.

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