CHALLENGES FACING AFRICAN WOMEN ENGAGED IN RESEARCH: REFLECTIONS ON MANAGING THE WORK-LIFE BALANCE

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ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Launched in March 2012, the African Peacebuilding Network (APN) supports independent African research on conflict-affected countries and neighboring regions of the continent, as well as the integration of high-quality African research-based knowledge into global policy communities. In order to advance African debates on peacebuilding and promote African perspectives, the APN offers competitive research grants and fellowships, and it funds other forms of targeted support, including strategy meetings, seminars, grantee workshops, commissioned studies, and the publication and dissemination of research findings. In doing so, the APN also promotes the visibility of African peacebuilding knowledge among global and regional centers of scholarly analysis and practical action and makes it accessible to key policymakers at the United Nations and other multilateral, regional, and national policymaking institutions.

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Introduction

I would like to begin by thanking the Social Science Research Council's (SSRC) APN/Next Gen program for bringing together such a large number of advanced and emerging scholars in one space to be resources for one another: to share and learn from each other as part of research training and capacity building, something most needed for scholars based in Africa. Having been a beneficiary of several such training opportunities as a former APN Individual Research Fellowship (2015) grantee and a current APN Collaborative Working Group (2022-2024) fellow, I know firsthand how transformative this program can be in helping someone become a more accomplished scholar, thereby enhancing their visibility as an Africa-based African scholar. So, to all the APN and Next Gen researchers present here today, I would like to congratulate you. The fact that you made it here as a fellow is an affirmation of your worth as a researcher and scholar, especially knowing how rigorous the peer review and selection process is. I would also urge you to count yourselves lucky and grab all the career development opportunities that the APN/Next Gen program will send your way, which will be instrumental in shaping your future as scholars.

The issue of managing work-life balance for women academics in Africa has been of concern to researchers over the years.[1] Today, I would like to share my reflections on this topic with you, based on my lived experiences for the last sixteen years as a woman researcher based in Africa.

I will speak to some of the macro and micro challenges I encountered along the way as I tried to balance my life and work, and how I have navigated through them. Firstly, it is my hope that my reflections will inspire all of us—not because they are exceptional, or because I have done anything out of the ordinary in these sixteen years, but because I believe that most, if not all, of us who are based

in African higher-education institutions, will identify with these issues. As the saying goes: "a problem shared is a problem half solved." Secondly, since the work-life challenges I have encountered over the years are presented through a woman's lived experiences, I hope that the women researchers, especially the early career researchers in this room, will feel encouraged in sisterly solidarity to join me in the juggle and struggle of managing work-life balance as we keep persevering, scaling the heights until we break the glass ceiling. Finally, I share this with the hope that the distinguished gentlemen in the room will also pick up a thing or two regarding how to support us women researchers in this journey as our colleagues, our friends, our partners, our husbands, our brothers, and even fathers as we try to juggle being mothers, wives, sisters, daughters and daughters-in-law, academics, and, most importantly, being women!

I have structured my lecture around some sub-topics which are by no means exhaustive but which, in my view, capture the nature of the challenges I have personally encountered, including those that have been captured in empirical research in Kenya[2] and elsewhere and those that I have gathered from fellow women colleagues who shared their work-life experiences at different levels.

Work environment-related challenges and breaking the glass ceiling

The first reflection that I want to share with you is what I would call "work environment-related challenges." This has to do with navigating male-dominated institutional cultures, including the hostile attitude from some male colleagues, managing these difficult male colleagues, women-unfriendly policies on promotions, and living with "conspiracy theories" meant to dent your credibility and reputation as a woman and as a scholar.

Since I began my academic career in 2007 as a Tutorial Fellow in the department of philosophy, where I am currently a senior lecturer, I have come across several cases of work-related challenges sometimes bordering on what I would call attempts at career sabotage, academic mobbing, and bullying[3] from colleagues at different levels. For starters, I am the only woman lecturer in the department of philosophy and religious studies. I am also the first tenured woman lecturer since the department was established in 1970. All my current colleagues were also my lecturers in my undergraduate and MA studies. Being the only woman, with my colleagues having been my former lecturers, has created unique challenges.

As Claudia Lampman, a professor of psychology at the University of Alaska observes, there are four significant predictors of academic bullying: being a woman, being a racial or ethnic minority, being of a younger age, and not having a doctoral degree. When I started my academic and research career, I did not have a doctoral degree.[4] My attempts to do my PhD at my home university were unsuccessful, partly because of what I would call "career sabotage." I ended up doing it at Rhodes University in South Africa. Being a lone woman of a younger age than all my male colleagues remained a "predictor" of work environment challenges until I scaled the academic ladder to be on par in academic rank with most of my colleagues.

In the early years, there were several times when I had to confront what I considered inappropriate and unwelcome verbal, nonverbal, and low-level physical aggression that any reasonable person would find threatening, intimidating, and offensive. These tactics were directed at me simply because I was a young woman. Empirical evidence has shown that women are largely victims of such hostile male-dominated work environments, regardless of their hierarchical position within academia.[5] When I was newly employed, I also had to ignore malicious rumors about how I got hired, despite the fact that my academic track record—even at that early stage—was outstanding. This is what I call "conspiracy theories:" theories meant to discredit one's integrity and reputation as a woman and scholar. I chose not to fight such conspiracy theories. Instead, I let my reputation as a researcher be defined by my academic output to disprove these nasty rumors. I think my research output over the years has set the record straight for me on this one. Empirical research has shown that women's successful performances tend to be more closely scrutinized and assessed by stricter standards in comparison to men.[6]

Besides working very hard to prove their competence, especially in an exclusive male-dominated environment such as mine, one must also be assertive enough to call out unnecessary intimidation from colleagues and become used to such assertiveness being characterized as a "lack of collegiality," which is simply an indication of unmet gendered expectations by male colleagues. Seeking the guidance of older and senior colleagues—be they male or female—greatly helps one to learn how to amicably navigate the inevitable "academic wars." Once in a while, when faced with such challenges, I sought the guidance of one of the oldest male professors who acted as my academic mentor. His advice was always that I should be careful not to spend the rest of my academic career fighting endless wars from colleagues who, at best, were simply intimidated by my achievements. He kept on cautioning me to avoid making their problems my

problems; to just mind my business. He urged me to see this as a motivation to shine so bright that my light opens their eyes to stop such an unwelcome attitude toward young women colleagues. I took his advice, and it has served me very well over the years. I urge my fellow women researchers who find themselves working in such openly hostile environments to stand up against such uncalled-for behavior. They should choose their fights wisely. I have learned over the years that the main aim of colleagues who exhibit such behavior is to deliberately sabotage your career progress by ensuring that you spend all your time engaged in endless fights. This leaves no time or peace of mind for you to focus on your career growth.

There is also the challenge of most university management systems being dominated by men. According to the Commission for University Education in Kenya, (CUE) report in 2019, public universities had a higher male academic staff percentage at 76% while women were 24%.[7] The fact that we have even fewer women at the top directly and/or indirectly benefits the privileges of male colleagues, although it is not a given that if we had more women on top, it would be easier for women in less senior positions. The persistence of such a wide disparity points to some systemic challenges. There have been endless calls and legislations to push for gender equity in appointments to both junior and top management positions in all departments in all public institutions in Kenya including universities. But the reality on the ground is different. For instance, it dawned on me as I was reflecting on this talk that the three times I have appeared for interviews at the university, all the panelists were men. Although I would not say that this has been an issue in itself, when you think of it, it is reflective of the university being a male-dominated space. An exclusively male interview panel of about seven panelists can, at times, feel intimidating to the woman candidate. There have even been cases of women candidates in such panels being frequently subjected to gender-biased questions, which in most cases are irrelevant to the positions they are applying for.[8] The relatively low number of women employed as faculty members is a clear point for understanding the patriarchal university cultures in Africa.[9] There have also been cases where men climb the career-progression ladder faster than women, mostly because as social psychologists have observed, men tend to be judged on whether they show promise, whereas women in similar circumstances are often judged strictly on what they have actually accomplished.[10]

Family-related challenges and climbing the "Maternal Wall"

The second issue I want to speak to is "family-related challenges." This may as

well be the elephant in the room when it comes to life-work balance for women researchers! In my view, balancing motherhood, wifehood, childbearing, child care, and other family-related responsibilities along with one's professional career needs, is the biggest obstacle for women researchers. Yet, most university systems globally do not consider the months and years lost as women researchers deal with child-bearing and care-related responsibilities. I am not saying that women should use the back door to progress but that there should be affirmative action policies that consider the time and years lost to birthing and nurturing children. Most women academics may be able to navigate around the glass ceiling obstacles but find that their careers become almost grounded after having children, making "maternal wall" an insurmountable challenge.[11] Most, if not all, public and private organizations in Kenya have gender policies. But these policies do not capture motherhood, wifehood, and family-related responsibilities as a gendered issue that should be taken into serious account to ensure fairness in career progression for women. Research and publications, postgraduate supervision, establishing international collaborations and connections, and attracting research grants are key criteria for promotion in most African universities, my own included. Although all this is good, a gender-responsive university administration would prioritize weighing women academics' teaching achievements over research and publication. This is because motherhood, childbearing, and rearing stand in the way of women academics being as productive in research and publication as their male colleagues are. Ensuring that women can get promotions with fewer points than their male colleagues, to compensate for years lost to juggling career progression and multiple family-related responsibilities, is—in my view—not promoting mediocrity or handing women promotions on a silver platter.

Generally, the rate of publication by African academics on average may be relatively lower by global standards. But, notably, women generally publish even less than men. A study conducted in South Africa found that male academics published almost twice as much as women academics. Additionally, the study also revealed that the most productive male academics published many more peer-reviewed articles than the most productive women academics.[12] This, in my view, can partly be attributed to women academics juggling completing their research alongside fulfilling the numerous family-related responsibilities that the average male colleague does not encounter.

I came across this quote which seems to capture the challenges that women researchers face: *"Women pay too heavy a price for success in their career…in the quest for education and career progress, the female graduates who seemed*

to have postponed important things (like marriage and childbearing). Today, I listen to the women of my generation mourning omissions for motherhood, the biological clock is ticking. Between education, career, and motherhood, which is superior? Which of these can be sacrificed or postponed over the other? Which of these is of uttermost importance in life? This is the question that every woman should ask herself."[13]

There are no easy or straightforward answers to these critical questions regarding the career woman. My response is: they are all equally important and none should be completely sacrificed or abandoned for the other. But of course, that is easier said than done. As a mother, I have had to grapple with childbearing, childcare issues, and how to balance this with my career choices—without sacrificing or shelving one for the other. How to navigate that has sometimes felt tougher than rocket science! The birth of my two children found me in tricky career situations where I needed to make some tough choices in order to balance my life and my work. I had my first child when completing my MA studies. To ensure I did not miss my final year exams, which meant extending my studies by another year, I had to push my due date forward just to sit for my final examinations. This may appear to be a non-issue, but it involved making such hard decisions while aware of possible, far-reaching health implications on my part.

My second child was born when my research career was just picking up. This included much travel to workshops, seminars, and conferences while being engaged in collaborative research projects. This meant I had to be away in the field for long periods of time. I had to continue making tough decisions that sometimes meant traveling to foreign countries for research project meetings—with an infant as young as five months old. It also meant sometimes sacrificing important seminars and strategic conferences for the sake of caring for my infant. I share these not because there is anything extraordinary in them but just to illustrate how childbirth, childcare, and support are real issues that women researchers have to deal with in their professional pursuits. Research on academic parents has shown that women's careers are often negatively impacted by parenthood while men's careers are relatively unaffected by it. This is what professor of law Joan Williams called the "maternal wall" in 2004.[14] Life devoted to research also means lots of traveling to academic conferences, and workshops, as well as being out in the field collecting research data. I have found myself wondering the best way to address all this without neglecting my family duties; especially my children.

My PhD studies were the most trying period in balancing my intense research work and my responsibilities as a mother, wife, sister, and other related family roles. Although I was an off-campus student, I had to make at least two visits to South Africa in an academic year and remain there for at least two consecutive weeks at a time. I also had to take on extra teaching load in the evenings to earn more. I also moonlighted at other universities away from home to raise money so I could afford the trips to South Africa. This made me not only sometimes feel like an absentee mother but also caused a strain between my spouse and me. My spouse often complained that I was living in the office seven days a week. I remember one time, in the midst of an unrelated argument, my partner said: "And if you go again to South Africa, you will not come back here." That caught me off guard. Luckily for me, some years earlier, when we met during our MA studies, he had declared that one of us must acquire the Dr. title for the family. So, when things cooled down, I politely reminded him about this declaration and told him that the only way this family title was coming home was by allowing whoever was already on it (me) to keep going: to do what I had to do and keep coming back! The declaration carried the day! Frequent travels, whether during studies and/or for conferences, can and will understandably make a partner (whose job does not involve traveling) feel unsettled, especially if the frequent traveler is the woman in the relationship. Acquiring a PhD and subsequent titles can also cause unspoken problems in a marriage. This is largely because of society's perception and attitude towards women regarding their place and role in the household. Societal perception and attitudes can put pressure on the man to start seeing his more educated and/or accomplished wife as a threat to his own place and role as the head of the family.[15] I count myself lucky that the worst it got for me was that "threat." I know colleagues who have been stopped by their spouses from attending international conferences or pursuing their studies abroad. Some of their careers stalled as a result. I know others who have suffered domestic violence. I even know many more whose marriages have broken down because of the same reason.

The other challenge that I have had to deal with, which is adjacent to a family-related challenge, is what I would call career compromise challenges. To grow as a scholar, both men and women academics must aggressively pursue postdocs, research fellowships opportunities etc., which means spending one year away from home at the minimum. I have had to compromise, decline, or not even apply for various postdoc and research fellowship opportunities because I did not want to be away from my family, especially the children.

In 2013, when I completed my PhD at Rhodes University, I was offered a residential 2-year postdoc at the same university. After thorough soul searching, I had to decline it because I did not want to leave my family at home, especially my 8-year-old daughter who I could not bring with me. Earlier in 2006, I had also declined a PhD scholarship at the University of Oregon in the United States of America (USA) because the monthly stipend could not support me, my daughter, and my spouse. I could not leave them behind because my daughter was only a year old. I also thought it was unrealistic for my spouse to quit his job in Kenya and accompany me to the USA. This, in a way, delayed starting my PhD by 3 years.

I keep informing my male colleagues of the vast difference between them and myself. They possess the freedom to dash off, knowing everything at home will continue uninterrupted. For women, the choices are: either you go with everybody, sacrifice the wellbeing of the children by leaving them behind, or you just let it go. Even with a supportive partner willing to care for the children while you are away, it is still a very hard decision for you as a woman to leave your children even temporarily. I know of a colleague who left her boys behind with her partner to go pursue her doctorate studies in the USA. Even with all the earnest support of her husband, she could not manage being away from the children: she had to come back and take them after just one year. She had to pay a career compromise price by completing her PhD two years later while still juggling motherhood with the demands of doctoral studies. Leaving my children behind has not been an option and that has meant letting career growth opportunities pass by, which is not ordinarily the case for male academics. To balance the deficit from these compromises, I attend as many strategic conferences as I can to network, forge possible research collaborations, and pronounce my academic presence out there.

Lack of women mentors and mentorship opportunities for women researchers

The other big challenge that women researchers face is the shortage of women mentors and mentorship opportunities. This has adverse implications for their career growth. Because of the small number of women academics who have made it to the top, there are not enough mentors to go around to inspire, encourage, and guide emerging women academics. Most of the few who have made it to the top are understandably overwhelmed navigating their work-life balance. The rationale of mentoring women academics should be to challenge existing structures of power and paternalistic relationships. Given the differ-

ent power positions implied by one's own gender identity, it is more likely that matching mentor and mentee from the same gender will bear the most fruit.[16] Male faculty have long-established networks and have often been able to identify mentors. In comparison, women tend to lag behind, partly because of their smaller numbers.[17]

Personally, the search for a woman academic mentor was unfruitful. The truth is that young women researchers have few or no occupational role models from whom they can learn how to balance the demands of societal expectations of women with the demands of their academic career. As a young scholar, you feel lonely with no one to hold your academic hand to guide you through this challenging journey. You feel like you are lost in some academic wilderness, and it may take a while before you find your way. Looking up to male mentors comes with its own challenges as a young woman scholar. Some male colleagues will layer the mentoring process with uncalled-for sexual advances. All this is compounded by the fact that our universities do not financially support staff to attend international conferences and workshops where one can meet a mentor or network for possible collaborative research and publications. So, for the APN/Next Gen fellows in the room, you should consider yourselves lucky that through the APN/Next Gen program, you will have numerous opportunities to be mentored, to meet potential mentors, and to network. This is a crucial first step to succeed in the academic journey. I would also urge you to aggressively look out for travel grants for early career researchers and PhD students. I took advantage of these opportunities to the maximum, attending conferences and workshops where I was able to meet inspiring prominent scholars in my field. I networked with scholars from other countries and disciplines, opening up research collaboration opportunities. I also met editors of journals who listened to my presentations and asked me to submit an article. That is how I made inroads into high-quality journal publications because the truth is that most high-index journals are not easy to penetrate. Some of my networking activities resulted in the publication of edited book volumes and book chapters.

Having experienced the roughness of being without sustained mentorship, my appeal to my senior colleagues is that we should make deliberate efforts to mentor the upcoming researchers both in this room and out in the world. We should at least establish a collegial post-PhD supervision rapport with our students who are aspiring researchers. We can hold their academic hands and usher them into academic publishing circles. My first two journal article publications after my PhD were with my Supervisor Prof. Herman Wasserman, who

was literarily just ushering me into the publishing world as he taught me about the "appropriate journal publishing table manners." That was a great milestone in getting my name out there.

For women researchers, our capacity to find a mentor is further complicated by the fact that family and personal circumstances may not allow women scholars to socialize with colleagues in clubs, where networks for career advancement and promotions are sometimes developed and sustained. Networks are paramount in an academic career and mentoring can significantly help in building such networks.[18] In my university, we have a senior common room, which is a members-only room. Although a member, I can count the number of times I have been there in the last sixteen years. This is because of my family-related responsibilities. Yet, this is the space where colleagues meet to socialize and network. Since male colleagues are more likely to have the time to hang around there, young male colleagues will link up with senior male colleagues who can mentor them. There are also the "old boys clubs" of established male professors who will only welcome "new boys" into these clubs and not "new girls." There are no similar "old girls clubs" composed of women professors and this is a disadvantage to the early career and emerging women scholars.

The stories we tell ourselves and the stories we have been told

Lastly, I would like to speak to what I call: "the stories we tell ourselves" and "the stories we have been told over time as women about obstacles to our career growth." Women are sometimes told, either directly or indirectly, that we should not be too successful or too ambitious because this will scare men away. For unmarried women, we are told it will be hard to find a husband. For married women with a PhD or professorship, we are told it will be even harder keeping a husband! We then begin to internalize these stories to the point of actually living through them. A young girl, whom I taught in an undergraduate class five years ago, was telling me how she has delayed coming back for her MA because she wanted to first find a husband. This was because she had been advised that if she is too educated, potential husbands may be intimidated and keep off. She was disappointed that she wasted two years with still no husband and no MA program to show for it! I told her that those potential husbands who would be intimidated by her MA are the sort of characters she should avoid like the plague.

Some of us women who have achieved a reasonable level of success sometimes want to fake failure so that we can appear as "ordinary women" who are

not a threat to men. This attitude can be an obstacle to one's career progression. Sometimes we realize, through our lived experiences, that it may become an issue when it is the woman instead of the husband who has a PhD, holds a professorial, or an equivalent high-flying career position. Societal attitudes toward highly accomplished career women—especially in academia—can put constant pressure even on the strongest and most supportive partner to prove to society that he is not "henpecked" by the seemingly more accomplished wife.[19] So, with time, some women choose to fake failure and progress more slowly in their careers, thereby not exploiting their full potential as professionals.

We are also told (and tell ourselves) narratives about what it means to be a successful woman in the academy or otherwise: a successful woman must be married with children, keep the family together at all costs, and literally sacrifice her life and ambitions for the family, etc. While choosing to make these decisions can be good, sometimes it makes us women hold tightly to relationships that derail our personal and career growth so that we do not appear as failures. Most feel that we have failed if all that we have to show is a PhD certificate or a professorial title—but included with a failed marriage or no history of marriage whatsoever! I know various women colleagues who have endured abusive marriages and stalled careers to preserve what they call "societal respect and dignity" as married women. I also know women colleagues who, although they have made it in academia, feel like failures because they are single mothers or single with no children. In the patriarchal societies we live in, most of the time, the woman will be blamed for anything and everything that goes wrong in the home whether it has to do with the husband, children, or in-laws.[20] So, we must be careful not to be held hostage by these narratives. My view is that, as women, we must re-examine the stories we tell ourselves and those we are told about what we can sacrifice, how much we should sacrifice, and how we can balance these sacrifices in the family front and career front so as not to ground one for the other.

In the workplace, the institutional male-dominated culture implies that we must conform to the dominant patriarchal image of a "good woman," which translates into relenting to the male-dominated, rather combative, and openly disrespectful culture of such male colleagues. We are told that confronting and challenging this male-dominated structure of power is "unwomanly": making you an abrasive, aggressive, angry, and disrespectful woman who thinks she can sit on men! This may stall your career growth and even edge you out of the academy if you do not master the courage to speak up and stand up for your rights as a woman scholar.

Concluding remarks

I would like to end my talk with some reflections on how we can navigate this rather delicate work-life balance as women scholars. Young and senior women researchers can appreciate and embrace the fact that dedicating our lives to research is no walk in the park. When you dedicate your life to research, you are dedicating your life to long hours and late nights consisting of continuous and consistent research and writing. Although I am no longer accused of living in the office because I work mostly from home, I am still accused of spending most of my waking hours only in one room—the study room, doing what my 7-year-old calls "work, work and work all the time!" I think I am as guilty as charged! Dedicating your life to research is a career path that requires a high level of discipline and self-drive to set goals and deadlines for yourself that you can meet. You are dedicating yourself to a life of seemingly endless travel to conferences, workshops, fellowships, and fieldwork. This also means sometimes you will spend long periods away from home, which will come at a price on the family front. You are committing your life to a career path that will often test and stretch your resilience to the limit as you try to get your priorities right to achieve the work-life balance.

To do all this, you need to have peace of mind. Therefore, you must surround yourself with a solid social support system: people who will not kill your dream, will motivate you to follow your passion, and will inspire you to grow not only professionally but as a person. Identify a mentor or a colleague with whom you are going to journey with. It may not be easy to get a mentor, but you can identify a peer with whom to share your academic trials and tribulations. You two encourage each other because a problem shared is as good as half solved.

For the next generation of researchers, always remember that you can achieve anything and everything that you set your mind and heart to. But this is provided only if you are willing to put in the hard work; you are consistently willing to be persistent and resilient; you are willing to sacrifice and compromise to achieve what will make you grow. You have to establish what, in your personal and professional life, is worth sacrificing and compromising and to what extent. If you do not sacrifice anything for what you want, what you want will get sacrificed. No accomplished person in any profession started where they are today. All of us start at a point of having no stories to tell, no titles to proclaim, no status to hold. But with passion, commitment, hard work, and discipline, we

all can be what we want to be. The road will be and has to be bumpy. But we must stay focused, using every obstacle we overcome as a lesson on how to do better and be better for next time. We strive to always fall forward and not backward!

As women, we must continually advocate for each other, seek out allies, and question conventional wisdom about what defines a good woman, a good wife, a good mother, and a successful woman. We must change our attitude, our mindset, and our beliefs about ourselves as women. We must question the stories we tell ourselves as women and those we are told by others. We have to understand that, whether in our personal, social, or professional spaces, we teach people how to treat us through our acts of commission or omission and how we respond to what people do or do not do to us. So, let us teach our colleagues, our friends, our spouses, our siblings, our in-laws, and the world at large how to treat us right, how to treat us with dignity, how to respect us equally as women and as professionals, and how to support us as we strive to achieve a reasonable level of work-life balance. As women scholars, we must choose not to be intimidated, we must choose not to be discouraged, and we must choose never to give up. Most importantly, we must choose to be courageous enough to confront any explicit or implicit gender biases as we work toward building our careers as researchers, mentors, and teachers, and balancing these with our personal and family lives.

NOTES

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