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Public Relations in Kenya: A Youthful Career Becoming Gender ‘Insensitive’ in Favor of Women?

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Abstract:

Public Relations, a budding profession attracting many youths in Kenya is growing at a very fast pace. The new ‘found’ discipline has attracted many women who seem to dominate in almost all sectors of the Country’s economy. The dominance is not only evident in the organizations in which they hold key positions, but also at the helm of the Country’s professional body’s leadership, the Public Relations Society of Kenya (PRSK). With the growing wave of women joining the profession, men have been left with no option but accept whatever else that is available. Having realized this developing trend, a study was carried out to ascertain the changing dynamics in a profession that was once dominated by men, the level of youthfulness of the practitioners, and the reasons that could have led to such gender disparity in the new and emerging career. It further sought to establish whether there was a co-relation between their age, sex and their performance in the course of their engagement. To achieve this, data was collected from practicing public relations practitioners through semi-structured questionnaires administered to 150 registered members of Kenya’s Public Relations Society (PRSK) who were sampled using a stratified random sampling technique on a calculated proportion of both sexes. Of the total number however, only 110 questionnaires were retrieved from the respondents. The study found that a large percentage of the PR practitioners were in their youthful age majority being women.

Keywords: *Public Relations, gender, dominate key positions, performance, youthful*

1. Introduction

While the practice of PR is gaining grounds in Kenya with many youthful practitioners, majority of those drawn to it being women, misconceptions and perceptions about the profession still abound. The profession seen as an all comers affair, with the belief that one did not require any training to practice; it is gender dominated and hence, a woman’s career, it is all about publicity stunt, and mainly for people who are not serious, and is “corporate prostitution” especially for the female gender. This misconception could indeed be attributed to how PR was introduced not only in Kenya, but the world as a whole.

After Kenya’s independence for instance, the political pressure on the expatriates to ‘Africanize’ the managements of the industrial sector as one way of training the citizen so they could assume their rightful control of the various sectors of the economy intensified. Because of such pressure, and the fact that the expatriate owners of the business firms were not willing to hand over the control of their enterprises to the local people, they resorted to window-dressing techniques so as to buy time and be seen to be complying with the authorities.

According to Anderson (1987), this was when positions such as “Personnel Manager,” “Public Relations Officer,” were promptly created and filled with people whose main, if not only qualification, was that they were ‘nice’. These were people with unquestionable loyalty to the top management and the ability to carry out the wishes of the expatriate superiors without questions. The duties of such people included liaison with Government departments in matters pertaining to contracts, work permits and licences (p.6).

The most unfortunate bit about the creation of such positions however, Anderson claimed, was that the occupants were lowly placed and never participated in any decision making. In fact, he pointed out, their roles were to help in giving the false but desirable impression that the organizations concerned were complying with the policy of Kenyanization.

Mwaloma (1993) notes that most of such perceptions resulted from the fact that, a good proportion of the people who claimed to be proficient PR practitioners had very little understanding of what Public Relations as a profession was all about,” (p.7). He argued that a competent Public Relations practitioner needed to be fully conversant with the corporate objectives of his or her organization, the means available for realizing those objectives, and the impact of those objectives and the general public. Only then could they draw up an understanding and support of an organization’s role. This was not the case with the practitioners then. It was this poor perception that has continued to affect the practice despite the transformation and training the practitioners have undergone.

Indeed, this perception is not different from the suspicion surrounding its introduction globally, where to date, with over 1,000 definitions, there is no single definition that could best define PR. Rex Harlow (1976) for instance, identified 472 definitions from the early 1900s when modern PR emerged, to 1976 when he was working, contrary to other established professions such as Law, Engineering, Journalism, among others (Butterick, 2011). Some scholars even think less of it as a profession (Salcedo, 2008), associating it with spin. Despite these, and many other challenges, the practice concerned with image building and the cultivation of corporate relations, struggles to position itself globally.

Kenya's PR steady growth has been linked to various factors and events the Country has experienced, many years after its formal introduction by the British Colonial rule in 1944 with a specialized position of PR under the Kenya Information Office (KIO) to foster favourable public opinion towards the war effort in its colonies (Kenya Information Annual Report, 1942). The events ranged from increased literacy levels, expansion in public education, better educated and more sophisticated citizenry, population mobility and exposure, universalization of dietary habits, effects of globalization, and the most recent one, the promulgation of the Country's new Constitution.

The growth is specifically associated with the 1990s, a season that was considered a milestone decade for the practice in the Country when the professional body, the Public Relations Society of Kenya (PRSK) hosted the International Public Relations Association Conference on *The Peace of Change – Africa's Public Relations Challenge* (Opukah, 1993). The conference which debated various changes taking place comprising those in communication, technology, democratization, globalization and increased consumerism raised the status of Kenya's Public Relations as it brought together key dignitaries to the meeting.

It is worth noting further that, between 1990 and 1993, Kenyan Public Practitioners won global awards in the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) Golden Awards, a move that confirmed Kenya's public relations practice as having attained international standards and recognition. In the year that followed (1994), IPRA appointed a Kenyan practitioner, Colin Church, to its Board of Directors which served as an endorsement of confidence the international community of Public Relations practitioners had in the Kenyan practice (Freitag and Quensberry, 2009). In all this time, though there might have been women practitioners, they were operating from the background.

However, while the Consultancy firms are credited for being the pioneering practitioners of PR from as early as 1954 (nine years before the Country's independence), with specialized public relations consultancies emerging in the 1990s, a firm, Strategic Public Relations Limited set the pace by becoming the first to be registered in 1996 to champion opinion polling within the industry. By then, a few notable women had already emerged, and were trying their hand in the practice, albeit without any known training.

1.1. Emergence of Women in PR Practice in Kenya

Muthoni Likimani for instance was one of Kenya's earliest woman practitioners. She is credited as having been a pioneer in the profession by establishing *Noni's Publicity, Public Relations, General Consultancy and Publishing* firm, becoming the first fully African owned Public Relations Consultancy in Kenya in 1973. It was equally the first of its kind to be started by an African woman in the region, a move that was considered unique especially in the 1970's when men dominated public affairs (Likimani, 2005, p.155). Likimani started off as a broadcaster and became quite prominent in the late 1950s before venturing into public relations. Other notable women who went on to play a leading role during the formation days of the Country's PR professional body, the PRSK, included; the late Muthoni Muthiga, and Eunice Mathu.

As stated earlier, while traditionally some professions like law, medicine, engineering, architecture, accountancy and business administration were considered prestigious as public relations never featured among the most lucrative of the professions then, the trend has now changed. According to John Thuo (personal communication, February 22, 2010), Public Relations practice in Kenya has gradually been attaining prestigious status if the academic and professional backgrounds of most of the current practitioners is anything to go by. There are today a handful of people who have not only attained masters' degrees, but a few either have earned, or are pursuing their PhDs. But, what could be the reason for this dominance by women in PR?

Macdonald (2007) attributes the reasons why there are more females than male in PR to the fact that:-

- Women are better communicators than men;
- PR pays better than any other female dominated field. Though this may be debatable in a country like Kenya, unless it is about prestige, and the fact that it is less tedious.
- Women find PR more welcoming than other business discipline.
- While women are in the Arts, the men are pushed to the sciences.

Be that as it may, the trend of women embracing the profession of public relations seems to be global in nature currently. Today, women practitioners seem to outnumber the males with recent statistics showing that there is now female gender domination in PR in Nigeria. According to Umeogu & Ifeoma (2012), this dominance is especially evident in some banks, consultancy firms and two higher institutions in the Anambra State of Nigeria.

In the United States of America for instance, the number of women working in public relations increased dramatically in the 1980, when more women than men worked as public relations practitioners for the first time. According to a study by Horsely (2009), between 1970 and 1982, the number of public relations jobs performed by women doubled from 25% to 50%.

Wilcox and Cameron (2009) likewise claimed the reflection was true even in professional organizations. According to the two, about 75% of the memberships in the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) were women, while the PRSA indicated

that more than 60% of its members were women. In comparison, the Radio and TV Directors Association reported that women constituted 57% of TV anchors, 58% of TV reporters, and 66% of the news producers in the United States. The same was reflected in similar professional programmes where about 65% of all majors in Journalism and Mass Communications programmes were women, with an estimated 70% of public relations majors being female (p. 2 - 4).

Quoting the U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics, Allen (2014) says it is indeed a fact that women comprise 63 percent of PR specialist roles and 59 percent of PR management positions. However, he says, many believe that females are underrepresented at the C-level in PR.

In fact, one theory that draws so many women to PR in the U.S. is attributed to the opportunities the profession offers to them to complete tasks they enjoy. Creedon (1991) says, women are mainly drawn to PR jobs because they offer the chance to be creative and write. Other researchers, on the other hand, contend that it is women's inherent traits that lure them towards a public relations career.

Certainly, these statistics are not any different from what is experienced in Kenya. A look at the Public Relations Society of Kenya's (PRSK) website confirms that out of the 510 paid up members, 60% of them are women (www.prsk.co.ke/PRSK_Paid_up_members 2017). This fete is equally true about the leadership of the professional body too, where six out of the 11 executive members (54%) are women (www.prsk.co.ke/executive-committee/ 2017). They occupy the position of the chairperson, vice chairperson, secretary, assistant treasurer, and those of two committee members, leaving the positions of assistant secretary, treasurer and three committee members occupied by their male counterparts.

2. Research Methodology

This study was conducted in Kenya, an African country located in the East African coast of the African continent. The Sovereign Republic which became independent in 1963 from the British rule, borders South Sudan and Ethiopia in the north, Somalia and the Indian Ocean in the east, Tanzania in the south and Lake Victoria and Uganda in the west, (www.gok.go.ke).

The Country's Capital City, Nairobi, serves as the capital and political administrative centre, with Mombasa, Kisumu and Nakuru being the other major cities. The Country occupies a land area of 580,370 km² (224,082 miles ²), and falls into several well defined topographical zones extending from the Indian Ocean coast up to lofty mountain ranges that reach elevations of more than 3,048 metres (more than 10,000 feet).

2.1. Data Collection and Sample Size

Questionnaires were used for primary data collection from a list of 600 Public Relations Society of Kenya's registered members. The members (population) were stratified into two categories based on their sex, out of who, 256 (42.7%) were males, and 344 (57.3%) females. Out of these, 150 samples were drawn using stratified random sampling technique on the calculated proportion of both sexes. Accordingly, the number of female respondents to be interviewed was 86 and that of males was 64. At the end of the exercise, only 110 respondents turned in their filled in questionnaires.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

To obtain data for the study, both primary and secondary sources were consulted. To collect the primary data, in-depth interviews and questionnaire were utilized; Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) employed for analyzing the quantitative data, with descriptive statistical techniques such as average, frequency and percentages. Further, Chi-square, an inferential statistical technique was also employed to ascertain whether there was any significant or insignificant association between performance and other variables.

3. Results and Discussions

Globally, the practice of Public Relations is growing at a very fast pace, with the youth embracing it in their droves. A study carried out in Kenya amongst practitioners confirmed the global development as revealed in the table below:

Age	Frequency	Percentage
20-29	60	54.5
30-39	38	34.5
40-49	11	10.0
50 and above	1	0.9
Total	110	100

Table 1: Age of Public Relations practitioners' respondents

In trying to establish the age range of the respondents, the study found out that a large percentage of them were in their youthful age, with a majority in the age ranges of between 20-29, followed by the age range of 30 – 39, and later 40 – 49. Those in the ages of 50 and above were the least in the profession.

According to the findings, 60 respondents representing 54.5% were in the ages of 20 – 29, making the age range the largest, followed by 38 practitioners representing 34.5% who represented the second age range of 30 – 39. There were 11 practitioners in the age range of 40 – 49 who stood at 10%. This particular study discovered that there was only one above the age of 50.

The findings confirmed a previous research study carried out by Davis (2008) that claimed the profession of public relations was for the youthful members of the society. Davis observed that it had often been remarked by Public Relations people themselves that “theirs is a younger person’s occupation, but when the magical mid-life tripwire is sighted more than a few prefer to press on regardless” (p.235). The study pointed out that between 20 and 30 years, many have graduated from college and could be moving into their second careers, which was why a significant number of them joined public relations as demonstrated.

Further, a similar survey carried out in 2009 by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) for around 2000 of its members for their annual *State of the Profession Survey* for instance showed that of the people working in PR:

- 34% were aged between 25 and 34.
- 31% were aged between 35 and 41.
- 35% were aged 42 and over
- The greatest percentage of in-house and not for profit CIPR members were found to be aged between 25 and 34.
- 51% of freelance PR practitioners were between 45 and 60

(Source: CIPR, *State of the Profession Survey*, 2009).

It was quite evident from the two studies that majority of the youth at either their youthful or early prime ages joined the profession and later went into freelance during their sunset days as the CIPR survey clearly shows.

3.1. Age Verse Performance

The study further sought to establish whether the age difference had any relationship with individual performances considering the general belief by most employers that the youthfulness could contributed to the organization’s output depending on the levels of engagement. The findings of the study were as follows:-

Age	Have you attained goal set by management					Chi-square	P-value
	100%	75%	50%	less than 50%	Cannot say		
20-29	3	16	0	1	4		
30-39	5	32	2	1	0	25.005	0.015
40-49	16	18	2	2	2		
50 and above	0	6	0	0	0		

Table 2: Public Relations practitioner’s Age versus performance

Note: The above Chi-square test indicates that there is a significant association between age of the respondent and performance at 5% level of significance.

It was quite indicative from the findings that though most of the practitioners’ attained at least 75% and above of the goal set by management, there was a significant difference in their performances based on their age distribution. According to the findings, there was a significant association between age of the respondent and performance at 5% as seen above.

Though the study clearly confirms that a difference in age would likewise mean varied outputs in terms of work related performances, studies by other researchers have established different outcomes, even though a significant number of them seem to concur with this finding. A study by Yearta (1995) for instance, indicated that age did not affect work performance, contradicting what was revealed by Smedley and Whitten (2006), who suggested that difference of age could also be a potential factor for work performances. Indeed, this was similar to the findings by a study carried out by Shultz and Adam (2007) which showed that there were significant differences between age groups concerning work performances. Kujala *et al.* (2005) emphasized that younger people were poor on work performances, a conclusion that was discounted by another study carried out by Birren and Schaie (2001).

However, other researchers looked at the whole issue from a different perspective. Jabroun and Balakrishnan (2000) as well as Fereshteh and Seyed Jamal (2007) noted that working experience was a significant factor in work performance. They claimed that the older the employees, the higher the work performance, a finding that was also supported by a study carried out by Borghans and Nelen (2009) who noted that younger employees had lower work performance compared to older workers.

As seen from the different research findings, various studies looked at the issue differently, others for, and against. While this particular study found a significant association in age performance, other researchers pegged the performance on the age of individuals, with others stating that work experience was a significant factor when it came to performance, hence, the older one became on what he did, the more experience he acquired, and therefore, the better the performance.

3.2. Sex

There is no doubt, and this is the reality dawning on most PR professionals that, women have made their mark in the PR business over the past decade globally. Indeed, the discipline is today probably one of the most fragmented professions in the world, comprising of a mix of in-house, independent and consultancy based practitioners. This flexibility which provides the opportunity for career-minded women to have it all in terms of high powered jobs, while still balancing family life - at least to some degree, is seen as part of the reason behind the success of women professionals.

In order to confirm whether this influx into the PR profession by women was real, a study was carried out to ascertain the claim and the following (Table 3) were the findings:-

Sex	Frequency	Percent
Male	47	42.7
Female	63	57.3
Total	110	100.0

Table 3: Public Relations practitioners' sex

It is evident from the findings that the practice of Public Relations in Kenya is dominated by female practitioners as shown on the above table. According to the findings, 57.3 % of the respondents were women, while 42.7% were men.

This trend can easily be explained considering the developments emerging in some of Kenya's Universities and tertiary colleges. A scrutiny of the Juja based Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology's (JKUAT) 2015 and 2016 graduation list for instance reveals that majority of those graduating with PR qualifications at either diploma or degree levels are women. The Premier University, besides offering diplomas, also offer Bachelors and Masters degrees in Mass Communication with different options in; Public Relations, Mass Communication, Advertising, Print Media and Broadcast Journalism.

In the first graduation held in July 2015, out of the total 79 students who graduated in the University's College of Human Resource Development (COHReD), 89.9% (71 students) were women who earned their qualification in PR (JKUAT, July 2015). During the second graduation held in November the same year, 116 graduated with Mass Communication degrees, out of which 55% (64 students) were women who were awarded PR degrees (JKUAT, Nov. 2015).

Further, out of the 30 candidates who graduated with PR and media related studies in July 2015 for instance, 80% (24 students) of them were women who were awarded PR degrees, while 72.7% (32 students) out of the 44 students who graduated during the second graduation in November the same year, were women who earned PR degree qualifications.

In June the following year (2016), 65.7% (23 students) of the graduates were women who earned their degrees in PR, out of a total class of 35 students (JKUAT, June 2016). This was further to be enhanced in the November 2016 graduation where out of a class of 42 students, 71% (30 of them) were women, who graduated with PR qualifications (JKUAT, Nov, 2016).

The trend seems to be in line with other findings by researchers in other parts of the world. A study carried out in the United States in 1979 by the *Impact magazine*, July/August 2002 Issue (cited in Sriramesh and Vercic, 2003) for instance, revealed that public relation which was once male-dominated was now attracting more women than men. According to the findings, the U.S. had 41% of women in the field of Public Relations. By 1983, the figure had gone up to 50.1% of the Public Relations workforce.

A decade later, the figure rose to 66.3%, and by the year 2000, the percentage of women had leveled off at about 70%, where it has remained to date. According to the mid 2002 ranking of the major Public Relations agencies, half of the Chief Executive Officers of such companies were women. The magazine attributed this increase to the high levels of creativity and multi-tasking among women, independence and responsibility associated with public relations and decent remuneration.

Similar views in support were equally expressed in a paper by Fitch and Third (2010). In the paper '*Working girls: Revisiting the gendering of public relations*', which examined how the dual process of feminization and professionalization mutually reinscribe one another in ways that reproduce the patriarchal gender relations underpinning the public relations industry, the two claimed that women made up the majority of public relations practitioners, arguing that the liberal – feminist battle for workplace equality had been won.

In Australia, another study carried out by Zawawi (2009), also claimed a similar trend, where the proportion of women working in public relations increased from 10% in the early 1970's to approximately 50% in the early 1980s, within a span of only 10 years.

Yet, another study by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) (2011), the professional body for the UK Public Relations industry (British Institute of Public Relations (BIPR), stated that "Its membership figures had more than doubled in the last 10 years, as approximately 55% of its members were female – having grown from 20% in 1987. 45% of its members worked in public relations consultancy, while 55% worked in-house, according to the body's website" (www.cipr.co.uk/2011).

A similar picture was given of women constituting majority in law schools, medical schools, and veterinary programmes among other academic disciplines. A further study by Grunig (2004) and others in three different countries namely, Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom, further observed that women constituted 60 percent of the practice and about 80 percent of the students' population.

3.3. Sex Versus Performance

According to the July/August 2002 issue of the *Impact Magazine* quoted by Sriramesh and Vercic (2003, p. 550), the increase of women in the profession of Public Relations was attributed to their high levels of creativity and multi-tasking capability, independence and responsibility associated with Public Relations and decent remuneration.

This view further necessitated a study to ascertain whether the practitioners' sex contributed in any way to their performance levels in the field in comparison to that of their male counterparts in Kenya. The following was observed:-

Gender	Have you attained goal set by management					Chi-square	P-value
	100%	75%	50%	less than 50%	Cannot say		
Male	10	31	1	3	2	2.447	0.654
Female	14	41	3	1	4		

Table 4: Public Relations' practitioner's sex versus performance

- No significant association is observed

As was observed in **Table 3** where the number of female practitioners outnumbered that of men, their performances comparatively did not show any significance association as both sexes performed well above 75% of the goal set by management as shown above. Hence, while they may have good attributes useful for the profession as Sriramesh and Vercic (2003) indicated while presenting their findings, that was not applicable in this instance, or was it a factor, as each sex seemed to have focused his/her attention to the set target as demanded by management. As was clearly realized, 41 out of the 47 male respondents achieved, and exceeded the goal set by management, leaving out only 6 that performed below the target. Equally, out of the 63 female respondents, 55 attained the goal set by management with 8 not meeting the target.

The study clearly pointed at a balanced level of performance by both sexes. Indeed, the findings are in tandem with those found in a study carried out by Crawford and Nonis (1996) and Shaiful Anuar, *et al.*, (2009) who reported that gender did not have any significant impact on work performance. Watson (2003) citing a slightly different study though on gender, on Australia's small and medium enterprises (SMEs) covering the financial periods 1994-1995 to 1997 to 1998 conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics suggested also that there was no significant differences in performance of male and female controlled SMEs. The study had been carried out specifically to compare the performance of male and female controlled SMEs.

However, Gilbert *et al.* (2010) looked at the issue from a broader perspective. While they observed that the differences between the work preferences of female and male business professionals were not consistent from nation to nation, the researchers in their study stated that there were few notable or significant differences between the work performances of female and male business professionals within each country.

On his part, however, Bengtson *et al.* (1978) saw clear inconsistencies in the performances between male and female employees in work places. According to the researchers, women were found to have better work performances compared to their male counterparts. Lynn *et al.* (1996) saw the inconsistencies on the side of women. In their findings, their study showed some inconsistencies where upon, it found out that men's performance increased with career stage measured as professional tenure, though they did not find a corresponding effect among women.

4. Conclusion

It is evident from the findings and discussions that, the industry that was once dominated by men, besides attracting majority of the youths, has now taken a dramatic turn by becoming gender 'insensitive', and the trend does not seem to show any immediate signs of narrowing the gap, posing the question as to whether women professionals have become a new PR super breed! These changes have become real as can even be attested by the statistics provided by Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, the Juja based University in Kenya. Women are becoming an influence in Kenya, gaining more respect and presented with greater professional opportunities, which is why it is drawing many women to it. Despite this though, there is still room for improvement in the way, the practice, and the female practitioners are viewed and treated.

Being key practitioners in the emerging career in Kenya, it is becoming increasingly important that men and women practitioners maintain team work towards equality as enshrined in the Country's Constitution (Government of Kenya, 2010). There may be need to try to establish further though, the issues that could hinder women's freedom to practice if any, in a bid to ensuring a level-playing field. This is if it probably emanates from men's attitude towards women practitioners and the role they should play in the field.

However, from the outlook, men should, as they have been, more supportive and open of the idea of female practitioners in the managerial and upper level positions. This way, more women would continue to pursue higher positions, as they do with studies, like that of chief executive officers – if there is encouragement, and be promoted when they deserve.

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