Concept Paper

Black, Female, and Divorced: A Discourse Analysis of Wangarĩ Maathai's Leadership with Reflections from Naleli Morojele's Study of Rwandan and South African Female Political Leaders

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Abstract: Marriage and divorce are factors that impact female leadership in Africa. Women are defined by their roles as wives and mothers and less as leaders. There is a dearth of research on the influence of marriage and divorce on female leadership in Africa. Most studies have focused on the societal importance of marriage and the negative effects of divorce on families. Using Wangarĩ Maathai's biography *Unbowed,* this paper explores the role of marriage and divorce and their intersection with Maathai's leadership. To enrich the analysis, I introduce insights from Naleli Morojele's study of Rwandan and South African female political leaders. African feminist thought, transformative leadership theory, and African concepts of marriage and divorce form the theoretical framework. The main findings indicate that Maathai's leadership is transformative. African feminism recognizes the role of men in women's equality. Female leadership has increased in Africa, though it contends with socio-cultural attitudes and colonial legacies that fuel its skepticism. Marriage is a duty and the focus of existence in African thought and divorce is synonymous with failure. Women's disunity on gender issues is problematic. Female leadership is very demanding and costly to family relationships. These findings are important in identifying gaps between policy and social attitudes on female leadership in Africa.

Keywords: Maathai; female leadership; Africa; politics; gender; marriage; divorce; culture

1. Introduction

The terms "Black", "female", and "divorce" underlie the social constructions that are applied to race, gender, and family transition, respectively. In this paper, I explore the intersection of the three constructions in discoursing Prof. Wangarĩ Maathai's leadership aspirations, activism, and achievements. Black as a racial identity was constructed to justify slavery and colonialism, which aimed to establish white racial supremacy for economic gains, amongst other factors [1–3]. In this context, "Black" means downgrading a human being to a simple color while ascribing to the *other* an extreme contrasting color to heighten the differences. As a result, Black becomes excluded, brutalized, exterminated, inferior, objectified, commodified, and dehumanized [2,4]. The term "Black" has undergone several reconstructions, creating a collection of confusing identities and dilemmas that emerge as Blacks navigate *their* world [1,5].

In this paper, Black will denote a cultural identity of the African people based on their values, beliefs, and practices, and not on skin color. However, this paper recognizes the aforementioned Black racial identity and its impact on the collective and self-identity and the advancement of Black African women and girls. For example, race and gender have been noted as double barriers to positions of leadership for Black women in academia [6–8]. In sub-Saharan Africa, except South Africa, race is replaced by cultural norms, practices, and ethnicity, which hinder Black African women's pursuit for progress and leadership. In South Africa, the apartheid system and its legacy created the most unequal society globally. The economic divide and its consequences on the Black South Africans could not

be addressed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of 1995, leaving many unhealed issues. Race and xenophobia are still contentious issues in post-apartheid South Africa [9].

Female leadership in Africa has duo patriarchal and historical dimensions. Whereas African patriarchy has been faulted with gender inequalities in Africa [10–12], the colonial legacy of Western patriarchy on the same has not received sufficient scholarly attention, even in Africa. For example, colonialism impoverished and complicated African women's lives through gendered forms of torture, thefts of ancestral lands, male detentions and murders, adult and child forced labor, displacements, family separation, and restrictions on women's education [2,13–17]. Moreover, Mathur and Mulwafu [18] locate environmental injustice within colonial practices of resource extraction and capitalism. These degradations of the environment that Maathai relentlessly fought against increased female poverty in Africa. Furthermore, the disintegration of the strong African family system that regulated significant issues, such as marriage, and discouraged divorce fell apart with colonialism, as Chinua Achebe [19] demonstrates in his classic *Things Fall Apart*. These historical events should not be taken as excuses by African leadership to evade responsibility for gender equity and human rights. However, they are significant in discoursing Black African women's issues.

It is presumed that African societies do not envision female leadership due to the patriarchal social order and specific roles assigned to each gender from early years [11,12,20,21]. Conversely, precolonial African societies differed in terms of gender relations and power. For example, among the Ibo and Yoruba of Nigeria, women held respectable and multiple positions of leadership. Contrary to Eurocentric gender conceptualization, men and women were viewed as social complements and not as oppositional, as noted by Nzegwu [22]. Other authors have argued that precolonial African societies had high regard for women for their role as nurturers, decision-makers, and innovative thinkers who managed their homes and agrarian-based societies with organizational leadership skills [23,24]. This structure changed with the onset of colonialism which introduced Western patriarchy. Due to the massive societal changes, contemporary African women in leadership usually struggle to cope with a variety of competing roles, making leadership an uphill task [22]. These include routine home and family management tasks that can impair close and spousal relationships, even leading to divorce. From a cultural and religious viewpoint, divorce is perceived as a failure in family management and leadership [25] and has negative implications for women more than men. Besides culture, ethnicity, and gender barriers to African female leadership, divorce carries a stigma. It is against these backdrops that Black female leadership in Africa can be better conceptualized.

There exists a considerable body of interdisciplinary literature on Prof. Wangarĩ Maathai's activism, especially after the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 and the publication of her memoir *Unbowed* in 2006 [10,26–32]. Most scholarship has centered around the gender and feministic dimensions of her activism, and rightly so. While these core aspects cannot be omitted when discoursing Maathai's achievements, less literature has concretely explored how marital status and marriage as an institution impacted her activism and leadership. Even less literature has explored the impact of divorce in casting a shadow over her leadership and intensifying the impediments against her, namely: ingrained cultural norms, the politics of the day, and the isolation of being a non-traditional woman. Ngunjiri [33], Kenya-born Professor of Ethics and Leadership, concurs:

> "It is quite clear from this short discussion of divorce in Kenya that research is needed to better understand the issues surrounding women's roles, marital relationships, divorce, and leadership in Kenya and quite possibly in other sub-Saharan African countries as well, particularly because I could not find literature dealing directly with divorce and the status of women and their ability to be effective credible leaders" (p. 210).

To fill this literature gap, this paper aims to explore the role of marriage and divorce and their intersection with Maathai's leadership. In doing so, I argue that marital status in all its distinct forms, viewed through African cultural lenses influences the perceptions

of Black African women and their place in society. I discuss the intersection of gender, leadership, and culture and the estrangement presented by divorce for Black African women. I further demonstrate the role played by education in ostracizing Maathai through marital status, and the paradox it presents for gender inequities in Africa. To create a comparative analysis, I include insights from Naleli Morojele's [21] study on South African and Rwandan female political leaders.

In Section 2, I introduce Prof. Wangarĩ Maathai and her achievements. Mbiti's [34,35] concepts of African marriage and divorce, transformative leadership theory [36], and African feminist thought [37] form a theoretical framework in Section 3. In Section 4, I discuss the social constructions about gender for African neonatal boys and girls that lead to gender-assigned roles. In Section 5, I discuss marriage and divorce in the African context and its weaponization for and against Maathai as a prototype of African female leadership. In Section 6, I integrate Morojele's findings into the discussion of Maathai's leadership. Finally, I discuss possible approaches to gender-balanced societies in Section 7 and end with the conclusion in Section 8.

2. Prof. Maathai: "She Thinks Globally and Acts Locally"

Prof. Wangarĩ Muta Maathai (1 April 1940–25 September 2011) was a Kenyan scholar, environmental and human rights activist, politician, and Nobel Peace laureate. Maathai's life has been acclaimed as legendary, and one with an enduring impact on transcending gender, sociocultural, and political barriers [28,31,32]. Prof. Maathai was a pioneer in several spheres: she was the first woman in Central and Eastern Africa to hold a Ph.D., the first woman to head a university department in Kenya, and the first Black African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize. In politics, Maathai was an appointed deputy minister for environment and natural resources, a member of parliament, and chair of the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK). During her lifetime, Maathai received 50 awards and more than a dozen honorary degrees, including the globally distinguished Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 [38]. Maathai was a resolute ecofeminist who, in 1977, founded the Green Belt Movement, a grassroot organization that has planted over 51 million trees and economically empowered rural women [38]. Moreover, even in death, Maathai resisted the destruction of the environment and opted for bamboo and water-hyacinth-made coffin instead of a wooden one. The water hyacinth is an environmental problem in East African lakes [38]. Maathai has been honored posthumously by the African Union, which designated 3rd March as "Wangarĩ Maathai day" and created an environmental prize in her honor. In Kenya, a road was renamed after her, and the Wangarĩ Maathai Institute for Peace & Environmental Studies, which she started a year before her death, continues to provide training in sustainable environmental management. The Benedictine College, formerly Mount Scholastica College, in the United States, where Maathai studied, unveiled a statue in her honor in 2014 [39].

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper utilizes an integrated approach in conceptualizing Maathai's leadership and its intersecting areas of marriage and divorce. Transformational theory of leadership [36], African feminism [37], and Mbiti's [34,35] concepts of marriage and divorce are applied to support the analysis. The transformational theory of leadership posits that leadership is not a position but a set of practices and behaviors that guide a leader to achieve goals. Transformative leaders challenge the system, bring together people through an inspired vision, promote collaboration and empowerment, motivate their followers, and lead by example [36,40]. This involves taking risks to achieve meaningful change.

Transformative and feminist leadership for women's rights and political leadership is a growing area of research. Globally, women make an immense contribution informally and formally before rising to political leadership, as noted by Wakefield [38]. African women have always held transformative leadership roles in their engagement with food security, ecosystems, and family management [14,23,24,41]. Moreover, during liberation

struggles from colonial domination, African women became leaders of their households in the absence of their men, who were recruited to carry out forced labor [23], murdered, detained, or fighting World Wars for the colonists [15]. However, these transformative leadership activities are poorly understood and African women in contemporary leadership still face systemic barriers at all levels [14,21].

Family management is a prime role for women in African societies and it is intertwined with procreation [20,24,34,42]. Nzegwu [22] describes women as "conduits of the lifeforce" (p. 80) that embody diverse roles that are not inferior to men in the pre-colonial Onitsha community in Nigeria. Motherhood was a revered position that was endowed with autonomy and power to procreate and sustain families and not a subjugated status as understood in contemporary society. Kenyan theologian and philosopher John Mbiti [34], asserts the importance of procreation through marriage: "For African peoples, marriage is the focus of existence (. . .) and a duty (. . .)" (p. 130) because it ensures individual and societal immortality through childbearing. Mbiti legitimizes procreation in the context of marriage. Within this framework, divorce is understood as a failure in family leadership [25] and an "accident" [34].

In Africa, marriage is a significant rite of passage that can be used to evaluate leadership or as a prerequisite for leadership [14,33]. Notwithstanding, the sexualization of women on biological grounds is one of the contentions of Western feminism and some African feminists, such as Oduyoye [43], although African feminism differs from Western feminism [24,44]. The African feminist landscape has broadened to include different types of feminisms [37,45] that are beyond the scope of this paper. African feminism originated from African women's resistance to colonial supremacy and its subordination of African women, which led to a breakdown of robust cultures and contemporary gender inequalities [24]. African feminism embraces African values of marriage, childbearing, and the preservation of the family [44,45], and recognizes collective indigenous wisdom, wherein are the shared tenets of negotiation, collaboration, cooperation, and balance [37]. While African feminism criticizes patriarchal structures, it also recognizes the role of men in the progression of feminism and justice [14,41,44,45]. This notion of African feminism suggests that each gender contributes certain values to the community and that leadership is not restricted to only one gender [22]. Female leadership styles are perceived as more transformational and collaborative, as noted by Chin [46].

Race and ethnicity influence women's leadership to align with societal cultural perspectives, in which, they have multiple roles and identities [46]. The intersecting roles and an individual's lived experiences impact their authenticity and leadership style. This is conceivable when discoursing African female leadership where women leaders identify with a variety of roles within the family and society [21]. In concurrence to Chin's [46] viewpoint, it can be argued that African women's leadership is viewed and experienced differently since the women are perceived as exceptions in male-dominated spheres, where cultural norms undervalue their participation. Wakefield [40] identifies family support, the rationale for leadership, and the development level of the political system as significant aspects for women in political leadership. These aspects impacted Maathai's leadership and activism, as will be discussed later in the paper.

4. Women's Destinies through Gendered Lenses

Gender is a significant factor in the birth of African children with couples preferring boys over girls, as noted by Baloyi and Manala [17]. For example, among the Gĩkũyũ people of Kenya, to which Prof. Wangarĩ Maathai belonged, the birth of a boy was heralded with five ululations, whereas it was four for a girl child, according to Wanjiru [20]. The ululations had a great significance for the child's future roles:

> "Ululations were prayers to God. For a boy, the five ululations represented five things which God was requested to give a boy. They prayed that the boy should be brave, king, rich, medicine man, and seer or prophet. A girl's prayer represented four things that she should be given by God, i.e., all the qualities

above but bravery. A brave woman was seen as a source of fear in the Gikuyu community" (para 3).

From the above quote, it can be presumed that the Gĩkũyũ boy and girl child entered the world on "unequal" terms, as far as the customary practice of ululations was concerned: each with a gender-defined destiny. Girls were socialized into female-defined roles, such as cooking, and boys to men-defined ones, such as cattle herding. Children grew up under the African traditional education system, which began at birth and ended with death [47–49]. Kenyatta [47] further notes that, among the Gĩkũyũ people, "the homestead was the school" (p. 99). Another possible reason for the preference of boys over girls is the African concept of personal immortality through procreation to maintain kinship and bloodlines [34]. Girls were expected to leave the home after marriage and to extend their husband's bloodlines through childbearing. This argument has been used to marginalize and deprive the girl child of education in collective societies [11,12]. Therefore, boys are regarded as social security for elderly parents, making them more valuable than girls and causing marriages without male children to be problematic for women [17,21].

In the Gĩkũyũ society, education was gender-specific and conformed to these distinctions as young boys and girls grew as noted by Kenyatta [47]. The author stresses the importance of both parents in raising the child since their roles were strictly diverse but complementary. Thus, the Gĩkũyũ women had their own designated roles within the family that did not conflict with the men. Gender complementarity was also practiced among the Onitsha community in Nigeria [22]. It is interesting to note that the Gĩkũyũ girls and women were also expected to become queens, rich, medicine women, and seers, a notion that contradicts contemporary gender inequality discourses on Africa. These were the noblest offices one could ascend to within the society of the day. They were positions of leadership, uncommon knowledge, and wisdom besides wealth. If the African girl child in ancient days could aspire for such positions, what hinders the contemporary African girl child from the same achievement? How did the African societies embrace the loathed patriarchy that is now at war with women's equality and perceived feminism?

Whereas boys were encouraged and expected to be brave, fierce, and courageous, a woman with similar traits elicited fear in the Gĩkũyũ community [20], which implies that such women were viewed differently. Going to war and protecting the family, land, and property were male-assigned roles that required bravery and made men heroic [20]. Leadership roles as instituted by Western culture were not imagined for women, since the role assigned to either child was determined by societal expectations, needs, and gender constructions. The colonial legacy created a new social order in African societies with an unending disturbance of gender relations. Within such a background, Maathai deviated by showing bravery and courage, traits that were restricted to men. It is not surprising that she was perceived as a non-traditional woman who needed to revert to her gender-assigned position through targeted attacks [10,14,30].

The Gĩkũyũ culture has been impacted by societal and global changes, and not all practices are upheld. However, Maathai was born in an era when the birth of children was still celebrated by ululations. It can be presumed that Maathai had received four ululations as a girl, but by her courage and achievements, she *earned* five of them like a boy child later in life. As a result, Maathai faced the wrath of African male leaders, such as President Moi, who termed her "wayward" [14] and disrespectful to men. The misogynistic attitude encouraged the othering of Maathai by fellow African women and men. Moreover, President Moi is purported to have instructed the Kenyan representatives to the 1995 UN women's conference in Beijing to leave whatever they had learned in China [50] and return home as African women. The Beijing conference spirit fueled activism that led African men to refer to women as "Beijinged", meaning programmed for equality. However, Maathai did not need to be "Beijinged": she was already ahead of her peers through empowering rural women and fighting for equal pay for female colleagues at the University of Nairobi [14,51]. Through transformative feminine leadership [40],

Maathai proved that women's contribution and participation are significant and that both indigenous and modern knowledge were needed to solve societal problems.

5. The Impact of Marriage, Education, and Divorce on Maathai's Leadership

5.1. Marriage

Marriage and divorce have been depicted as two extremities with the similitude of birth and death in most African cultures. According to Mbiti [34,35], marriage guarantees and safeguards individual and societal immortality through procreation. Marriage, though a contractual agreement is expected to be a lifelong commitment [52]. Because marriage in Africa is linked to procreation, there is a stigma attached to childlessness or barrenness, as noted by Baloyi and Manala [17]. The inability for a couple to continue bloodlines and kinship through childbearing has social, emotional, and psychological implications. Mbiti [34] compares barrenness to a genocide that has the potential to wipe away whole generations. Moreover, childlessness could result in divorce or polygamy to preserve barren marriages [17,42]. Contextually, a woman's role is mainly viewed as reproductive and finds its fulfillment in marriage, but a childless marriage is not regarded as consummated [42,43]. Against such a cultural background, Maathai was expected to fulfill her role as a wife and mother, irrespective of her high level of Western education. The performance of these roles had implications for Maathai's leadership.

Marriage in African societies has a religious dimension [42] since religion is a major element of the African way of life that penetrates every facet [53]. African religion goes beyond deity worship [54] and includes art and natural sciences [55,56]. It is not surprising that Mbiti [35] labels Africans as "notoriously religious" (p. 1), implying that religion is deeply rooted in African values and practices, including marriage. Therefore, marriage is perceived as a divine social order that must be fulfilled, whereas singlehood is perceived as an abomination [17,34]. Singleness carries a social stigma: in some African communities, women who died single were not buried within the homestead, but on the border to signify their low status, as noted by Mbiti [34]. The intersecting of marriage with religion emphasizes its central place in African societies and influences the perception of a woman based on her marital status.

In *Unbowed,* Maathai [14] subscribes to a pro-marriage stance, an important component in African feminism [24,37,44]. The Gĩkũyũ community to which Maathai belonged attached high importance to the mentoring and preparation of young persons for marriage, especially in early times [47], and Maathai was not an exception. In 1969, while pursuing her doctorate studies, Maathai, then 29 years old, married Mwangi Mathai, a Kenyan who had also studied in the United States. Kanogo [51] notes that Maathai's marriage was performed according to the customs and practices of the Gĩkũyũ community and also included a church ceremony. Maathai embraced her culture and aspired to be a wife, mother, and career woman [14,51]. However, she did not envisage that her education and career would lead to the disintegration of her family through divorce. In a cultural context, Maathai had fulfilled the two core roles for an African woman: wife and mother. Perceiving marriage as a lifelong commitment [52], Maathai bought a house with her earnings and allowed the deed to be solely in her husband's name, a gesture construed as contradictory in feministic terms [31]. Was Maathai trying to be a "good African wife" through the house gesture? Was she trying to neutralize the powerful effects of her high education and recognize male authority? Is this an enactment of the negotiation, balance, and compromise proposed by Nnaemeka [37] in Nego-feminism? Whatever the case, for educated African women, the challenge of shifting between cultures and knowledge has implications on self-identities, as noted by Gatwiri and Mclaren [57].

It can be argued that Maathai experienced a constant shift between the strong forces of elitism and cultural belonging and had to re-invent herself to meet the resulting challenges. While she strived to combine her roles effectively, her career trajectory intertwined with activism seemed to be at cross purposes with her core cultural roles, which were already demanding. The management of such challenging, competing, and significant roles present

a major challenge for African women in leadership positions [10,21,51]. This shows that transitioning to other roles outside the home can be challenging for married African women leaders. Wakefield [38] underscores the importance of family support for women in political leadership. However, identification with feminism and related pursuits presents a dilemma for married African women who disengage from such activities, deeming them as incompatible with marital values [30]. Similarly, Dery [58] notes the strong resistance to feminism in Africa, where it is perceived as foreign and toxic. Political leadership in Kenya interpreted Maathai's leadership pursuits as being fueled by foreign ideologies that were anti-culture and unacceptable [10,14]. Maathai's leadership challenges demonstrated the need for change in attitude towards women's participation in societal development. As a transformative leader, Maathai's life was dynamic and transitions were an integral part of her life, as she challenged the status quo to achieve a multidimensional vision. However, the vision seemed incompatible with marriage. Maathai [14] noted that, for her marriage to survive, she was expected to "fake failure and deny her God-given talents" (p. 140), an idea that was inconceivable to such a great visionary. Major transitions were inevitable if Maathai was to accomplish her purpose. The inability of couples to navigate through life transitions is considered to be a major drawback in the marriage that could lead to divorce, according to McGoldrick et al. [59]. This is evident in Maathai's life as she progressed in her leadership roles and activism.

Besides Maathai's remarkable education, her husband's political ambitions propelled her into the public limelight as a supportive politician's wife [14,51]. Maathai recognized the significance of family support in leadership, as emphasized by Wakefield [40], and the importance of marriage in portraying her husband as a good leader on the one hand. On the other, she acknowledged that her submissiveness or defiance could support or jeopardize his political aspirations, especially due to her high level of education. This is further demonstrated by the transformation of her dress code to portray a decent and culturally acceptable wife during the political campaigns and thereafter [14]. While these efforts may be construed as strategic means to a political end, they portray the power of marriage in the evaluation of good or bad leadership in African societies, Maathai's adaptability to maintain her marriage, and her leadership skills.

In Christianity, marriage has been upheld as a prerequisite for good leadership, as noted by Peters [25]. For example, a Christian leader is expected to be married to one wife as foundational evidence of his ability to manage the church, which is the larger family. Ngunjiri [33] recounts her surprising experience when she was not considered for an advertised leadership position at a Christian institution that she had assisted in its formation. One of the board members had specific concerns about Ngunjiri: "She cannot be the principal because she is young, she is not married, and she has no children" (p. 207). Being unmarried and childless excluded Ngunjiri from a position that she was professionally qualified to hold, notwithstanding her young age. Oduyoye [43] and Ngunjiri [33] note that, in Africa, unmarried persons are not considered adults but "children" in marital terms. Thus, marriage is regarded as an institution in which individuals could gain maturity and the valuable experience necessary to manage more demanding responsibilities and complex relationships. Against such a backdrop, marriage played a role in the evaluation of Maathai's leadership.

5.2. Education

A discourse on Maathai's marriage, divorce, and leadership is not complete without the education component. Education was the vehicle that propelled Maathai to various leadership positions and global prominence in a nation that was destitute of female leadership and education. According to UNESCO [60], "the lack of education is itself a dimension of poverty" (p. 11). Maathai [14], refers to education as a "guaranteed ticket" (p. 71) out of poverty and profitless hard work consistent with the peasantry in Africa. She further notes that education alienates many from their roots but she overcame the alienation by remaining close to kinship and the environment. However, education led to turmoil, life

threats, public disgrace, and a marital breakdown that impacted Maathai's private life and leadership. Education turned Maathai [14] into a "sacrificial lamb" (p. 146) to attack other modern, educated, and independent women. It was also one of the main reasons that culminated in her divorce, as she was reportedly termed as "too educated, too successful, too stubborn, and too hard to control" [14] (p. 146).

In collective societies, female education can be a threat to marital relationships. Bromfield [61] notes that 85% of divorced women in the United Arab Emirates were more educated than their husbands. Bromfield's study shows the connection between education and rising divorce rates among Emirati women due to career choices in a society wherein culture, religion and strong kinship ties are highly prized. Using Maathai's example, female education and its associated success are viewed as hindrances to being a "proper woman in the African tradition" [14] (p. 196). These outcomes that portray female education as incompatible with culture are paradoxical. Maathai's harassment due to her education is a contradiction in Africa, where poverty and gender inequalities in education are still high [11,12,62]. Moreover, the UNDP [63] estimates that Africa loses $95 billion annually in lost economic potential due to gender inequalities. Maathai [14] notes that Kenyan society idolizes education as a solution to all problems. However, the same society places more "value on boys than on girls" (p. 139), thus disregarding fifty percent of its population, and still expects to solve societal problems. In many African cultures, girls and women are viewed as strangers or outsiders. For example, among the Gĩkũyũ of Kenya, a woman was termed "Mundu wa nja," meaning a person from outside the clan, and one who does not possess rights of inheritance [17,64] due to the expectation of her marriage into another strange family [65]. Contextually, Ombati [11] notes that "educating a girl is sometimes likened to watering someone else's lawn" (para. 18). However, the value of female education is not a new concept in Africa. Ghanaian educationist and sociologist, Dr. James Emman Kwegyir Aggrey (1875–1927), spoke the following popular phrase, which is associated with female education and leadership:

> "The surest way to keep people down is to educate the men and neglect the women. If you educate a man, you simply educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate a whole nation" [66] (p. 105).

In his quest for female education in Africa, Aggrey recognized the importance of female education almost a century before the United Nations formulated the Millenium Development Goals and the current Sustainable Development Goals. On the one hand, Aggrey envisaged that women's education would be "aggregated and magnified and enjoyed by a wider context–the family and the nation" [67] (para. 1). On the other, he predicted the negative consequences of gender inequality in Africa when he argued that "The surest way to keep people down is to educate the men and neglect the women" [66] (p. 105). Through her education and transformative leadership, Maathai demonstrated both of Aggrey's insights: she contributed to important local and global issues and exposed cultural norms and practices that hinder women's progress in Africa.

5.3. Divorce

In comparison to marriage, divorce is equated to incompetence and a lack of determination, vision, and power in the management of a family [23]. In other words, divorce is synonymous with failure. This stigmatizing view of divorce affects women more than their male counterparts since failure is attributed to women, as noted by Maathai [14]. Divorce produces a deep social stigma and shame, especially in collective cultures, due to the isolation that divorced women face from their families and society [61]. Mbiti views divorce as a misfortune and invasion on an organized system:

> "Divorce is a delicate accident in marital relationships. In the African situation, what constitutes a divorce must be viewed against the fact that marriage is a "process". In many societies that "process" is complete only when the first child is born, or when all the marriage presents have been paid, or even when one's first

children are married. Marriage involves many people and not just the husband and wife (...). Once the full contract of marriage has been executed, it is extremely hard to dissolve it. If a dissolution does come about, then it creates a great scar in the community concerned" [34] (p. 145).

According to Mbiti, marriage in Africa is not an individual matter, nor is its dissolution, since the extended families are involved from the onset. Likewise, Baloyi and Olehile [68] note that "the kinship system provided indigenous African marital therapy and every person counted on the model for the sustenance of marriage" (para. 9). However, since Mbiti's writings five decades ago, societal changes, such as urbanization and industrialization, have had intense effects on the African family, as noted by Arugu [52]. Divorce, separation, and remarriage are now realities in African communities and have received social acceptance even among religious groups [52,68]. While the kinship system offers an opportunity to reconcile couples, not every case is successful. It can be argued that Maathai's marriage required more than cultural intervention to be salvaged since her activism was already interpreted as cultural defiance. Maathai's ex-husband had accused her of being "too strong-minded for a woman" and "too hard to control" [14] (p. 146). These phrases labeled her as a cultural rebel, non-traditional woman, and a "white woman in Black skin" [14] (p. 110). The remarks alienated Maathai from the collective identity and affected any sympathy towards her. The clash between cultures, tradition, and modernity cannot be ignored when tackling divorce, marriage [52], and female leadership in sub-Saharan Africa [33].

In *Unbowed*, Maathai [14] discusses the pain of divorce and its aftermath. Besides leadership responsibilities on several fronts, divorce automatically made Maathai the head of her household by taking on the responsibilities of her absent husband. She was deprived of family support, which is significant for the success of female leadership, as noted by Wakefield [40]. She had to reorient herself to cope with added responsibilities and a new identity. Maathai's situation echoes post-conflict and colonial societies where women are forced to take up leadership of their households due to male deaths or forced migration [21]. Using Mbiti's concept of marriage as the core of existence that ensures immortality through procreation, divorce can be interpreted as a type of death [34]. From Mbiti's notion, it can be theorized that while marriage gives, divorce takes away just like death does albeit not physically. The loss of a spouse through divorce warrants grieving. According to Robinson [69], a family therapist, divorce is more disastrous than the death of a spouse due to its far-reaching consequences on the entire family system. Moreover, the dissolution of spousal relationships, loss of homes, and endless transitions plunge families into a world of legal wrangles and pain. Maathai perceived her divorce as the death of a loved one:

"The days that followed were very lonely and sad. I searched my soul constantly for reasons that Mwangi had decided to leave me. I knew he would blame me for the failure, even as the public too, would blame me: It is always the woman's fault. I thought I had done everything: humbled myself, helped with his public role, served him, and loved him. I had tried to be a good mother, a good politician's wife, a good African woman, and a successful university teacher. Is it that those were too many roles for one person to excel in? (...) Where did I go wrong? (...) I felt as if a close relative had died" [14] (p. 142).

Maathai's divorce application and ruling reflect social constructions based on gender, female biology, and rigid norms. Maathai's husband had accused her of adultery and cruelty; reasons that could legally end a marriage in Kenya and that were culturally unacceptable. While the cruelty accusation was dropped, the adultery was upheld but was contested by Maathai as false without success. Female adultery then and today is still taboo but men escape the consequences due to gender constructions and societal acceptance of polygamy in African communities. Thus, Maathai [14] asks: "Did the lies have to be so extreme, so deliberate and so hurtful?" (p. 145). Maathai's husband used the courts to objectify and discredit his wife as an immoral woman, making her vilified by both men and

women. The divorce, which Maathai termed as a "Western-style" one (p. 145) and "a cruel punishment" (p. 145), was a colonial legacy that aimed at exposing family issues to the public domain, and it was a cultural contradiction. Maathai "felt stripped naked before her children, family, and friends" (p. 145). Besides being a traumatic experience for Maathai and her children, the divorce interrupted her leadership responsibilities and caused grief, humiliation, and isolation.

Mbiti [34] terms divorce as a "delicate accident" (p. 145) that leaves scars on its victims, suggesting a permanent stigma, especially for women. In Maathai's situation, the scar was quite deep: she was the one who received legal and societal backlash, rather than her politician husband, who had deserted the marital home, carried away household items, such as curtains and the television, without consideration of the children, and initiated the divorce on falsified grounds [14]. Besides terminating Maathai's marriage, the male-dominated justice system of the day sentenced her to imprisonment for criticizing the ruling and made her the first person in Kenyan history to receive sanctions for contempt of court [51]. The divorce became a weapon to unleash terror on Maathai and to serve as a warning to other women who might trespass gender boundaries through defiance [14] (p. 146). The divorce had emotional, financial, social, and psychological consequences on Maathai. As noted in her biography, she "felt cheated, betrayed, taken advantage of and misused and left in pieces" (p. 147). The husband's demand for Maathai to stop using his name reveals the intensity of the estrangement the divorce had caused. It was yet another stripping of Maathai's identity that had legal and administrative consequences on her. It took exceptional courage for Maathai to re-invent herself and pursue her leadership goals and aspirations even with a severely dented public image and emotional turmoil.

Maathai's divorce paved the way for public disgrace, verbal abuse, threats, and humiliation from men in leadership positions. She had lost her honor as a wife, which was a primary position for an African woman, culturally speaking. The male-dominated political system refused to acknowledge Maathai as a leader based on competency and not gender. This is evidenced by a member of parliament who remarked that the opponents of President Moi's environmentally degrading project were "a bunch of divorcees" (p. 191), while another called for a collective curse on Maathai [14]. In addition, President Moi termed her as a woman "with insects in the head" [14] (p. 196). Such remarks from top leaders implied that Maathai was a failure without any mandate to speak on behalf of the society, thus questioning her moral behavior, education, expertise in environmental issues, and overall leadership. While environmental justice had nothing to do with divorce or marriage, in Maathai's case, it was used to curtail her leadership by breaking her spirit.

Some of Maathai's experiences are not unique to Kenya or African societies. Three parallels from the Western world demonstrate the high power wielded by white patriarchy over white women. Firstly, independent, educated, and assertive white women in the Western world in the nineteenth century were declared insane by white psychiatrists, who ordered them to be locked up in mental asylums for defying domestic control and disturbing family peace [70,71]. The diagnoses applied to such women were often linked to their biology: "uterine derangement", "moral insanity", "eccentricity of conduct", or "extreme jealousy". Some of the women, such as Elizabeth Packard (1816–1897), were committed to mental asylums on instructions from their husbands for defying their control [70]. The marriage institution was weaponized to harm women by declaring them insane and separating them from their children and families for years. The incarceration period in the asylums could be as long as sixteen years or more, and the use of straight jackets to restrain the women was in constant use. To be declared sane, the women needed only to be submissive and not rebellious, a requirement that was expected of Maathai also. A parallel can be drawn here with Maathai's divorce, in which the husband accused her of being "too strong for a woman" and "hard to control" [14] (p. 146). Moreover, Maathai was often arrested and locked up, since her activism was construed as defiance.

Secondly, educated and assertive white women in the nineteenth century were viewed as mentally ill [70,71]. White male physicians gave such women diagnoses that pathol-

ogized the success of female education [71]. The physicians perceived female education in the Western world, then, as a preparation for the lunatic system, and thus a waste of resources. African patriarchy is often condemned for women's inequality in education. While Africa's gender inequalities in education are sustained by the social-cultural order, they can be traced to Western patriarchy, which was greatly opposed to female education for white women [70,71] and was introduced to Africa through colonialism [2,13,16,17].

The third parallel from the nineteenth-century Western world that is relevant to Maathai's leadership discourse is the use of clitoridectomy to silence women. A Kenyan male politician threatened Maathai with clitoridectomy at the height of her activism, which had developed into human rights grievances [14]. Clitoridectomy, commonly known as female genital mutilation (FGM), is a practice that is performed in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East using diverse methods [12,72]. In the Western world, in addition to clitoridectomy, doctors applied leeches on female genitals, injected female genitals with ice water [70], and removed the ovaries [70,71]. Clitoridectomy was practiced widely in Britain and North America until the early and mid-twentieth century according to the authors. Ebila [10] notes that FGM depicts women's bodies as objects of torture and mutilation. The broad purposes for FGM in the Western world were not distinctly different from the ones that led to Maathai's threats and accusations and contemporary practice: to silence women and enforce feminine morals. Therefore, threatening Maathai with FGM was meant to curtail her freedom and to punish, control, and intimidate her using the female anatomy to reinforce male authority vested in an archaic tradition. Female circumcision is still practiced in Kenya, though unconstitutional, and is viewed as a way to curtail female freedom and as a punishment [53].

Divorce stripped Maathai of male protection, respect, and authority usually accorded to married African women, and exposed her to vulgarities. Maathai's experiences demonstrate the risks and complexities of navigating the male-dominated leadership landscape. As a result, in the quest for gender equality, African women appear to contradict their causes and interests. One of the well-educated Kenyan female leaders in Ngunjiri's [33] study illustrated a related dilemma:

> "I am not a rebel, I cannot be a rebel. Even though patriarchy is very high in this country, I need the sense of belonging and respectability that comes with certain social structures, such as marriage, in order to be credible in fighting for women's rights as human rights. I respect such structures and remain in them even as I challenge them and seek to change them" (pp. 207–208).

Besides showing the power of the marriage institution in African female leadership, the above quote exemplifies a strand of African feminism that recognizes that men are an integral part of women's empowerment [14,37,41,58]. The above-quoted female leader suggests the importance of strategic collaboration, compromise, and balance to solve societal issues inclusively, as proposed by African feminist thought. In this context, the obligation to responsibly collaborate with women is placed on the men. Dery [58] predicts the poor outcomes of excluding men from gender empowerment in Africa by viewing them only as perpetrators. It is unusual to expect perpetrators to collaborate. Kamau [30] notes the misconceptions and suspicions about feminism in Kenya for both men and women, even those who closely work within women's movements. Thus, there is some stigma associated with feminism in Africa due to its association with Western feminism, which is perceived as radical, anti-men, anti-child, and inapplicable to African values [41,44].

Maathai, like the above-quoted leader, demonstrated that there was no rationale to divorce her husband to challenge patriarchy. Maathai regarded her leadership and marriage as separate roles but not necessarily conflicting. Marriage offered an emotional, social, and financial covering that Maathai wanted to preserve and that is inferred in the quote above. It must be taken into account that Maathai's husband was well-educated and that they had married while she was pursuing her doctorate, the highest academic level attainable. He was aware that his wife was exceptional, being the first woman to receive a Ph.D. in East and Central Africa. What career expectations did Maathai's husband have for his

extraordinary wife? As Maathai recollects, her husband bowed down to societal pressure, which deemed her more powerful than him, and therefore he had to prove his worth as a man. Competition replaced complementarity in the marriage, although Maathai desired to remain a wife, mother, and professional:

> "I was not ready for a divorce and had hoped for reconciliation. I wanted a family and didn't want another husband. But Mwangi did not share my feelings" [14] (p. 147).

The incompatibility between the couple was conveyed by the husband's desertion of the family home and divorce. This shows the challenges faced by African female leaders in navigating family and leadership responsibilities and the role of their spouses in their success or failure. Family support is an important component of feminine leadership, as noted by Wakefield [40]. While there are still many changes to be achieved in gender relations and advocacy in Kenya, Maathai's activism impacted the social order through her selfless leadership and women's empowerment.

6. Enriching Maathai's Leadership Discourse with Reflections from Morojele's Study of Rwandan and South African Female Politicians

Naleli Mpho Soledad Morojele is a South African scholar and human rights practitioner based in South Africa. In her book, *Women Political Leaders in Rwanda and South Africa: Narratives of Triumph and Loss*, Morojele [21] explores the lived experiences of Rwandan and South African female political leaders in their ordinary lives as mothers, wives, and politicians. Morojele's findings are imperative in Maathai's leadership discourse in providing a comparative, concurrent, and differential analysis, especially in marriage and family relationships. The backgrounds of the Rwandan and South African women, including Maathai's, are all post-conflict: genocide, apartheid, and colonialism, respectively. These differential backdrops are infused with both African and Western patriarchy, making them complex for African women to navigate due to ingrained inequalities rooted in race, ethnicity, class, and gender.

In Africa, there is an outcry about the low representation of women in political leadership, although it has continued to increase. For example, Rwanda has the highest representation in the world with 63.8% of female parliamentarians, South Africa has 41% [21], whereas Kenya's is quite low at 27.8% [11,73]. Gaining more seats in politics is not a predictor of more power for women, as noted by Wakefield [40], due to other dynamics discussed in this section. It is assumed that women's representation is important for the achievement of women's interests. However, women's concerns are highly controversial due to additional differences outside gender, such as race, class, personal experiences, and ethnicity, as noted by Morojele. Differential feminism attests to the situation. For example, a major critique of Western feminism is its failure to address race, class, and gender issues that affect Black women [6,41,74]. Consequently, white women are perceived as both collaborators and beneficiaries of imperialistic systems that enslaved, oppressed, and impoverished Black women. Western feminism has also been perceived as authoritarian towards issues of African women [44]. In other words, a universal sisterhood based on women's interests is problematic.

During Maathai's activism for women's equal pay and benefits at the University of Nairobi, she noted that "fighting battles with women can be very difficult" [14] (p. 116). Maathai's Kenyan female colleagues regarded her activism for equal pay as threatening to their marital relationships and refused to support her, although, like them, she was married. Marriage and family values superseded the quest for equality even when it affected the family income. Often, Maathai faced the wrath of fellow women during her activism. For example, Kenyan female leaders reprimanded her for being rebellious to top political leadership and shunned and criticized her activism. When Maathai was imprisoned, female wardens scorned her and cut off her braids, possibly to signal that she was involved in a culturally improper struggle [14]. Similarly, Kamau [30] observes that women in leadership positions fail to oppose policies that marginalize women, and some women join politics

for personal gain and not to further gender equality, as noted by a Rwandan interviewee in Morojele's study. Another interviewee was shocked to learn that a party founded by a woman in South Africa did not have any gender-related policies. The presence of women in high offices may not necessarily advance women's causes [21]. Moreover, some women are pro-patriarchy by choice and may not share the vision of gender equality, as noted by Dery [58]. These inconsistencies are also reflected in fragmented Black African feminism.

An important finding of Morojele's study is the fortitude of African women leaders to pursue leadership aspirations amid enduring patriarchy, which is termed as being "beyond us" [21] (p. 28), and the realization that societal development includes both men and women, young and old. These opinions were expressed by two of the study participants, one of whom distinguished her leadership vision from radical or Western feminism. It can be suggested that Maathai's feminism was not against men per se but against established legal and social order that denies women equal opportunities to contribute to society. Maathai represented the interests of both men and women, and most of her ardent supporters were men, including clerics. She recognized that men were an integral part of the realization of women's equality, and she even offered them jobs at her NGO, a gesture that surprised Western funding agencies due to differences in feministic thought. In her Noble Peace Prize acceptance speech, Maathai included men among the beneficiaries: "I know the honour also gives a deep sense of pride to our men, both old and young" [75]. Her attitude and approach show that gender, though significant, is secondary to impact, since the whole society benefits.

Generally, African women are evaluated by the success of their homes and families [21]. This gendered perception impacts women's aspirations for leadership due to the challenge of balancing family management and career aspirations. Morojele's findings showed that political leadership is demanding for married women, even when some men are supportive of their wives' political ambitions. Female political leaders made many sacrifices to compensate for their absences at home, such as traveling back and forth after parliamentary sessions to be with their families for a short while. Still, some of the women were blamed for their husband's infidelity due to their long absence from home, casting doubts on their aspirations, while some husbands suspected their wives of infidelity. During their absence from home, some women relied on the extended family to provide childcare, especially in emergencies. Like Maathai's case, Morojele's [21] findings revealed that some marriages ended in divorce: "Partners and children feel neglected, and there has been a trend of divorces amongst the women" (p. 133). Another participant said the following about women's political leadership and marriage:

> "Yes, I was married like many people were married; but the other big thing about politics is you don't actually have a life. You don't have a life, your life doesn't belong to you. It's difficult: if I think of everyone that I know, there's one couple that's still married, otherwise every single person that I know is divorced" (p. 134).

The above quote explains the personal challenges faced by some female leaders in political positions wherein divorce emerges as the dominant outcome. Still, other leaders sacrificed to remain in unhealthy relationships due to the stigma of divorce. Another interviewee regretted her inability to balance leadership and parental relationships. Although her children are now grown, there is an irreparable estrangement between them. Notably, emotional responsibilities associated with parenthood cannot be delegated and need careful consideration. Without spousal or family support, female leadership becomes an uphill task with consequences to the individual, family, and society. These findings confirm Maathai's divorce experience and the aftermath.

The contribution of African women during conflict and thereafter through the rebuilding of their communities, political leadership, and heading households have shaped their communities in several ways [23,32]. However, political leadership and activism are risky undertakings for women, as demonstrated by both Maathai and Morojele's study participants. Maathai experienced police brutality, beatings, threats, imprisonment, and

a failed assassination plot to silence her. Similarly, some South African female leaders in Morojele's study resigned from their party positions due to telephone threats at night from men who accused them of taking their positions as breadwinners. These threats can be presumed as strategies for decreasing women's representation and silencing their voices for equal opportunities. However, the underlying role of poverty ought to be factored in the threats. Dery [58] argues that poverty hinders men's support for women's equality due to joblessness, which introduces competition with women. In other words, for men in poor societies, gender empowerment becomes an existential threat. Finally, female politicians in Morojele's [21] study had to work harder than their male counterparts to prove their competence, as one South African participant indicated:

> "If you make blunders as a woman, it's not taken as, 'this minister has blundered', it's 'this woman!'. And therefore, because society doesn't expect much of us, just like the white people didn't expect much of a black government, so we've got to be vigilant (. . .)" (p. 144)

The quote illustrates the overwhelming nature of female leadership and lack of confidence in women's performance, which is equated with the low confidence in Black leadership in post-apartheid South Africa. The grandiosity of white supremacy is mirrored through African patriarchy by highlighting Black women's shortcomings and not their abilities or achievements. Maathai experienced similar treatment, where her activism was construed in gendered ways and she was stripped of every respect and dignity accorded to a high-ranking public personality. Although women's representation in political leadership has increased in Kenya, South Africa, and Rwanda, the three countries represented in this paper, gendered attitudes towards women and their ability to equally participate in nation-building are still inflexible.

Gendered social attitudes towards female leadership though prevalent in Africa are not unique to the region and its cultures. Even in developed nations, women leaders still face gender-specific challenges. A fitting example is Annalena Baerbock, Germany's foreign minister who was elected to office in 2021 [76]. During Baerbock's chancellorship campaigns, she experienced sexism and related humiliating attacks. Some questioned her ability to balance between politics and motherhood to her young family. Similar to African women, she was viewed first as a mother and not a leader in a nation that was previously led by Angela Merkel, a woman, for 16 years. Notably, Baerbock is the first female to hold the foreign ministry portfolio in German history. It is reasonable to wonder how these attacks are possible in a highly developed nation that has made advancements in gender equality. Hence, Morojele [21] notes that "becoming a powerful woman does not make you a man" (p. 21).

7. Working toward Gender-Balanced African Societies

Culture is a complex phenomenon, especially in Africa, where there are numerous communities. Across the world, rigid patriarchal hierarchies and harmful practices towards women are usually attributed to culture. Drawing from Maathai's leadership and Morojele's study, there is no single approach that is sufficient in challenging ingrained cultural norms that marginalize African women. Women's ability to interrogate oppressive cultural practices and appropriate helpful ones is a strategy employed by some of Morojele's study participants to reduce gender inequalities and ensure female participation in political leadership. For example, in Rwanda, where political female representation is the highest globally with women holding 50 percent of ministerial portfolios [77], a pre-colonial tradition known as *Imihigo* has achieved increased accountability and performance. The tradition includes making signed performance contracts across several levels of national management. *Imihigo* reduces chronic problems of implementation and accountability, even regarding gender-related policies. Those who fail to deliver are publicly humiliated, fined, and forced to resign. This culture-driven process is only achievable in a society in which personal or family honor is highly prized. Although Rwanda "continues to register

significant gender equality gains" [77] (para 3), gender equality is a work in progress in Africa.

The success of *Imihigo* as an indigenous tool is attributed to it being a familiar and well-understood concept by the Rwandan population [78]. Besides *Imihigo*, Rwanda has drawn from other pre-colonial practices as instruments to accelerate nationwide development. The approach of searching within indigenous knowledge to deal with societal issues is also demonstrated by Maathai in her environmental activism. Maathai [14] drew from indigenous ecology, to which she was "always attentive " (p. 43) and aware of her "kinship with the soil" (p. 47) from an early age. These lived experiences attest that Maathai's activism for environmental preservation was not foreign in origin as purported by her opponents. The use of an indigenous tool to facilitate national development created a sense of interest and ownership in Rwanda, as noted by Scher [78]. Every strategy to create societal change will be entrenched in its corresponding culture, whether foreign or indigenous. Can the Rwandan approach be replicated in other African countries to stimulate balanced female participation and national development?

The exploitation of gender and motherhood is another strategy from Morojele's findings related to women's involvement in societal changes. For instance, Rwandan female politicians again draw from tradition and present women as symbols of peacemakers to facilitate national healing and confront contemporary societal problems. This approach facilitates the participation of women in leadership in a subtle but powerful way.

> "For us there is no way we force things. What we do; we lobby. We lobby our fellow men, we discuss, you convince . . . That's how we do it. When you try to force and use strength, a woman to a man, you're worsening the whole thing and I think that's why some parliaments are failing to get a good number of women in the parliament, because they want to force their way, so for us that will not work within Rwanda" [21] (p. 58).

While culture can be appropriated to support gender representation, as shown by the Rwandan case, it could be a double-edged sword, as demonstrated by one of the South African female leaders:

> "We have as society and as the ANC not worked very hard on the understanding of culture. We use it conveniently. When it's convenient for us culture is static and it's not dynamic, it does not change. When it's convenient, culture is dynamic and it changes" [21] (p. 59).

The convenient use of culture could also imply some women favor practices that oppress women, such as polygamy and FGM, even in countries where it (FGM) is outlawed. Goetz and Jenkins [79] note that women are not homogenous and some may not identify with gender-related advocacy due to ethnic and national affiliations. Nonetheless, the authors offer suggestions for advancing feminist claims that depend on a range of factors but broadly on the nature of the political state and policy-making process. Having strong women's movements and building alliances with parties and legal experts, including feminist lawyers to influence state policies, are strategies put forth by the authors. For example, in Kenya, FIDA [80] a women's rights organization, has been involved in fighting all forms of injustices and discrimination against women and offering them legal aid for over three decades. Relatedly, Maathai's Greenbelt Movement, a grassroot women's organization, was founded under the umbrella of the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK), yet another women's organization. The power of women's movements cannot be ignored in advocating for women's interests and broader societal issues.

Finally, increasing quotas by political parties to reflect a proportional male-female representation is one way of improving women's representation, as suggested by Morojele. In addition, the author suggests forming women voting blocs to pass legislation that favors women. In Africa, this would require solidarity beyond ethnicity and nationality. Even so, Goetz and Jenkins [79] note the challenge of achieving policy changes for marginalized groups, especially when the desired reforms are antagonistic to cultural norms. Maathai's

experiences attest to the authors' point of view, but through her determination and relentless pursuit, Maathai transformed Kenyan society and the world.

8. Conclusions

Prof. Maathai was a transformative leader who challenged the system, took risks, and inspired locals and the international community through her vision of environmental justice and human rights. She promoted collaboration across the society, motivated and empowered women, and led by example with great resilience. While attempting to straddle between culture and modernity, Maathai revealed both the impact of colonial legacies on the African way of life and the irreconcilable differences. Marriage and family management are major areas of challenge for female leadership in Africa, as demonstrated through Maathai's life. Whereas marriage is perceived as a respectable and coveted institution, divorce is regarded as a failure and has an impact on the societal perception of women in leadership. Patriarchy is not restricted to African or collective societies, since Western women faced serious gender prejudices and abuse as late as the nineteenth century. African feminism differs from Western feminism and recognizes the role of men in women's empowerment. Defining African women solely by their core roles as mothers and wives limits their ability to contribute to societal development. Using inclusive indigenous knowledge could help African societies to create gender balances in which women and men equally participate in development. Whereas some women achieve the balance between family management and leadership, others fail, and their families disintegrate. However, they continue to impact their societies with new personal and social identities, as exemplified by Prof. Wangarĩ Maathai.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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