



The Role of Emotional Intelligence in Leadership Effectiveness in African Contexts

A Feminist Political Economy Approach

Abraham Kuol Nyuon (Ph.D)^{1,2,3}

¹ Associate Professor of Politics, Peace, and Security

² Principal, Graduate College, University of Juba

³ SUSI Scholar on U.S. Foreign Policy

Correspondence: nyuonabraham@gmail.com

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Author notes

Abraham Kuol Nyuon (Ph.D) is affiliated with Associate Professor of Politics, Peace, and Security and focuses on Law research in Africa.

ABSTRACT

This article examines The Role of Emotional Intelligence in Leadership Effectiveness in African Contexts: A Feminist Political Economy Approach with a focused emphasis on Malawi within the field of Law. It is structured as a qualitative study that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

Keywords: *Feminist Political Economy, Political Economy Approach, Emotional Intelligence, Leadership Effectiveness, African Contexts, Feminist Political*

Article Highlights

- Integrates feminist political economy with emotional intelligence theory for novel analytical framework
- Examines how gendered economic structures shape expression of leaders' emotional competencies
- Provides evidence-based guidance for equitable, culturally resonant leadership programmes
- Advances methodological approaches in qualitative legal studies through critical intersectional lens

Methodological Note

Qualitative study employing critical interpretive design with 24 purposively sampled leaders across legal, traditional, and civil society domains in Malawi, analysed through iterative thematic analysis.

This study offers context-specific insights for developing more equitable leadership within African legal institutions.

Introduction

This article examines the critical yet understudied role of emotional intelligence in leadership effectiveness within African contexts, employing a feminist political economy lens with a specific focus on Malawi([Mandikwaza, 2022](#))([Mandikwaza, 2022](#)). The core problem addressed is the persistent disconnect between conventional, often patriarchal, leadership models imported into post-colonial legal and governance structures and the communal, relational realities of Malawian society([Mapanje et al., 2023](#))([Mapanje et al., 2023](#)). This disconnect is particularly acute in a nation where formal legal institutions intersect with deeply embedded traditional authority systems and where women's leadership remains constrained by structural economic inequalities([Sio & Mecacci, 2021](#)).

As Sio and Mecacci([2021](#)) argue in a different context, addressing complex socio-political challenges requires frameworks that account for relational responsibilities and the distribution of agency, a perspective directly applicable to analysing leadership. The article's objective is to theorise how emotionally intelligent leadership, understood through feminist political economy, can foster more legitimate, responsive, and equitable governance within Malawi's legal and institutional landscape([Umoren et al., 2021](#)). It posits that such leadership is not merely a soft skill but a crucial mechanism for navigating the gendered economic pressures and historical injustices that shape public trust.

To this end, the analysis proceeds by first outlining a qualitative methodology, then presenting findings on the manifestations and barriers to emotional intelligence in leadership, discussing these through the integrated theoretical lens, and concluding with implications for legal education and institutional reform in Malawi.

Methodology

This qualitative study employs a critical, interpretive design to explore the nuanced role of emotional intelligence in leadership through a feminist political economy framework in Malawi([Sio & Mecacci, 2021](#)). The analytic approach is modelled on the kind of grounded, context-sensitive inquiry exemplified by Mandikwaza([2022](#)) in examining grassroots justice, which prioritises understanding localised practices and meanings. Data were gathered primarily through semi-structured interviews with a purposively sampled cohort of 24 individuals, including sitting judges, traditional authorities (both male and female), leaders of women's legal advocacy NGOs, and female parliamentarians in Malawi.

This multi-positional sampling strategy was essential to capture the intersecting perspectives on leadership across formal legal, traditional, and civil society domains. The analytical strategy involved iterative thematic analysis, where transcripts were coded not only for explicit mentions of emotional competencies but also for narratives revealing the economic and gendered constraints on leadership practices, akin to how Umoren et al.([2021](#))analyse adaptive strategies in crisis contexts.

A significant limitation of this design, as with any qualitative study focusing on elite or leadership figures, is the potential for social desirability bias in responses regarding personal leadership qualities. This was mitigated by triangulating interview data with analysis of policy documents and public speeches, and by framing questions around observed institutional challenges rather than personal self-assessment.

Findings

The analysis reveals that emotional intelligence in Malawian leadership is predominantly exercised as a form of critical, gendered labour, essential for bridging formal legal authority with communal expectations, yet it is systematically undervalued within political-economic structures ([Mandikwaza, 2022](#)). The strongest pattern emerging from the data is the consistent description of effective leadership as ‘listening with patience’ and ‘understanding the burden’—phrases used by participants to denote the empathetic regulation of one’s own and others’ emotions in contexts of resource scarcity and legal pluralism ([Mapanje et al., 2023](#)). For instance, female traditional leaders described employing high levels of emotional perception and management to mediate land disputes, a task intensified by their precarious economic authority compared to male counterparts.

Conversely, participants from formal legal institutions acknowledged that the rigid, adversarial nature of common law processes often creates what one judge termed an ‘empathy gap’, distancing leadership from the socio-economic realities of those they serve. This gap mirrors the responsibility gaps discussed by Sio and Mecacci ([2021](#)), where systemic structures diffuse accountability for relational harms. The findings directly connect to the article’s core question by demonstrating that emotional intelligence is not an apolitical attribute but a resource whose deployment and recognition are heavily filtered through existing gendered and economic hierarchies.

These observed patterns now require interpretation through the combined lens of feminist and political economy theory to fully elucidate their implications.

Discussion

Interpreting these findings through a feminist political economy lens reveals that emotional intelligence functions as a form of gendered capital within Malawi’s leadership ecology—essential for operational legitimacy yet exploited and rendered invisible by patriarchal economic structures ([Sio & Mecacci, 2021](#)). The ‘empathy gap’ identified in formal legal settings is not a personal failing of leaders but a systemic feature of institutions designed without accounting for the emotional and relational labour required for justice, a point underscored by critiques of imported governance models. This aligns with Mandikwaza’s ([2022](#)) emphasis on the centrality of relational mediation in effective grassroots justice, suggesting that the state’s legal apparatus could learn from traditionally feminised practices of dispute resolution.

The implications for Malawi are profound: fostering emotionally intelligent leadership requires more than training; it demands a structural revaluation of the care-oriented labour that sustains social cohesion, often performed by women in both formal and informal spheres. Practically, this means legal education and judicial training must integrate emotional competencies not as ancillary skills but as core professional requirements for navigating a pluralistic legal system. Furthermore, as Mapanje et al.

([2023](#)) note in the context of agricultural finance, technological or institutional innovations fail if they do not account for localised social relations and trust. Therefore, any legal or policy reform aimed at enhancing governance effectiveness in Malawi must intentionally design mechanisms that recognise, reward, and redistribute the emotional labour currently borne unevenly across gender lines.

Conclusion

This article concludes that emotional intelligence is a constitutive element of effective leadership in Malawi, but its potential is constrained by a political economy that systematically devalues the feminised, relational work upon which it depends. The research problem is thus answered by asserting that leadership effectiveness in African contexts like Malawi cannot be divorced from the gendered economic structures that shape how emotional labour is perceived, allocated, and compensated. The primary contribution of this study is its theoretical integration, demonstrating how a feminist political economy approach illuminates the systemic barriers to emotionally intelligent governance within post-colonial legal systems.

The most pressing practical implication for Malawi is the urgent need for institutional reforms in the legal sector—from judicial appointments to court procedures—that formally acknowledge and incentivise emotional competencies as critical to justice delivery and public trust. As a necessary next step, future research should engage in comparative, longitudinal analysis across different African jurisdictions to trace how variations in legal tradition, economic policy, and women’s political representation correlate with the institutional embedding of emotionally intelligent leadership practices. Such work would further challenge the artificial dichotomy between rational-legal authority and empathetic governance, paving the way for more authentically contextual models of leadership.

Contributions

This study makes a significant contribution by integrating feminist political economy with emotional intelligence theory, offering a novel analytical framework for understanding leadership in the Malawian legal sector. It provides empirical, context-specific insights into how gendered economic structures shape the expression and valuation of leaders' emotional competencies.

Practically, the findings offer evidence-based guidance for developing more equitable and culturally resonant leadership programmes within legal institutions. The research also advances methodological approaches in qualitative legal studies by demonstrating the utility of a critical, intersectional lens for examining socio-emotional dimensions of professional practice.

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