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Climbing the academic ladder: collaborative autoethnographic narrative of women academicians in Tanzanian higher education institutions

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ABSTRACT

In higher education, few women have managed to climb to senior academic ranks such as Associate Professor and Professor. However, little has been done to document the lived experience of those few women who successfully charted this journey. This collaborative autoethnographic study documents the narratives of two successful women academics in Tanzanian higher education institutions who managed to reach senior academic ranks. The objective was to narrate their personal life experiences of climbing the academic ladder in order to inspire other women academicians with similar aspirations. Guided by feminist theory and resilience theory, the study offers insights that may inspire other women who aspire to advance but face institutional, structural, and social barriers. The study findings revealed that confidence and resilience are fundamental to academic advancement. Additionally, effective time management enables women to balance academic demands and family responsibilities. The findings further revealed that mentorship, collaboration, and professional development are equally critical enablers for women's academic advancement. While resilience theory affirms participants' adaptive capacity in the face of adversity, feminist theory critically reminds us that individual resilience should not substitute for structural responsibility. The implications are that women's advancement depends on confidence, time management, mentorship, and institutional reform; resilience must not be allowed to replace institutional accountability.

INTRODUCTION

Women climbing to high academic ranks remains a persistent global concern, but its intensity is particularly acute in Sub-Saharan Africa. Across higher learning institutions (HLIs) in the region, women continue to be concentrated in lower academic ranks while senior ranks, Associate Professor (AP) and Professor (P), remain overwhelmingly male-dominated (Ajibade Adisa et al., 2025; Galán-Muros et al., 2023). In Tanzania, this disparity between men and women in climbing the academic ladder is stark and well-documented. For instance, at Sokoine University of Agriculture, female professors constituted only 2.23% of the professoriate compared to 15.03% for their male counterparts. Similarly, at the University of Dar es

Salaam, only four out of 33 full professors were women as recently as 2020 (Massawe & Sife, 2020; Mwakitalu et al., 2024). The factors sustaining this imbalance in climbing academic ladder are multiple and intersecting. Women face inadequate mentorship, scarce role models, limited institutional support, and the compounding burden of balancing professional responsibilities with family and community obligations, all while being held to the same promotion standards as men. Despite the hurdles identified in the literature, there are few women who have climbed the academic ladder and managed to be in a position of AP and P. It is therefore important to have lived experiences of those few exemplary women who managed to climb the academic ladder.

Recognising persistent gender disparities, international organisations, national governments, and higher learning institutions have enacted various conventions, policies, and strategic frameworks aimed at promoting gender equality and women's advancement in leadership and academic careers, including climbing the academic ladder. At the international level, initiatives such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5) advocate for gender equity (Tripathi & Nitu, 2024; Filho et al., 2022; Thien et al., 2025), while nationally Tanzania has adopted policies such as the National Higher Education Policy (1999,) Education and Training Policy of (2014) revised (2023) and the Women and Gender Development Policy (2023) (Tarimo, & Swai, 2020) institutionally, universities have established gender policy, gender desks, mentorship programmes, and affirmative support mechanisms to facilitate women's promotion and career progression. Again, despite these good initiatives and interventions, yet the number of women who managed to climb the academic ladder remains low compared to men.

In the Tanzanian context, promotion of academic staff who climb the academic ladder via promotion are guided by TCU. According to the TCU handbook of 2019, the criteria for promotion of academic staff should align with standards and guidelines outlined in Part 5. Although there is variation among universities regarding criteria for climbing the academic ladder as stipulated by TCU, these criteria remain minimum standards that every university has to abide by to ensure fairness and quality, as well as a road map that can inspire academic staff, especially women, to work towards meeting these standards. Despite these directives, few women have managed to climb the academic ladder (Ajibade Adisa et al., 2025; Galán-Muros et al., 2023; Massawa & Sife, 2020; Mwakitalu et al., 2024).

Abundant of studies has been done in Tanzania on higher education (see, for example, Amani 2023; Nemes 2026; Seni & Nemes, 2025; Tarimo, 2019; Tarimo & Swai, 2024; Kadikilo et al., 2024; Nyoni and Yusuph 2017; Mushi et al., 2021; and Mwakitalu et al., 2024). However, many of these studies are broad in scope. Although previous studies such as study by Nyoni (2019), Nyoni and

Yusuph (2017), Mushi et al. (2021), and Mwakitalu et al. (2024) concentrated on women academician and their representation in leadership positions. These studies did focus on the lived experiences of women who successfully climbed the academic ladder and what lessons their journeys hold for other women who aspire to do the same. Even a recent study by Tarimo and Swai (2024) documents stories of two women senior academician, but their study focused on career experiences of female academics. Further, a study by Nemes (2024) explored career pathways from classroom to academia in Tanzania but did not focus specifically on women's experiences of climbing the academic ranks. Collectively, the aforementioned studies did not employ a collaborative autoethnographic approach. Hence, studies documenting lived experiences of women who climbed the academic ladder in higher education personal journeys remain rare, particularly in the Tanzanian context.

This study is guided by one research objective, which is to narrate personal life experiences towards the journey of climbing the academic ladder to inspire other women academicians who aspire to do the same. The study is novel as it provides lived experiences from women who managed to climb the academic ladder. The study will inspire other women who aspire to climb the ladder on what to do, eventually increasing the number of women with higher academic ranks.

The study is guided by two theories, namely the feminist theory and the resilience theory. The feminist theory, which was originated with Mary Wollstonecraft in 1972 advanced by Simone de Beauvoir in 1949 and popularized by Betty Friedan in 1949 (Wollstonecraft, 2018; De Beauvoir, 2018). The theory assumes that gender is socially constructed and thus roles, behaviors, and expectations between men and women are created by society. This implies they are not fixed; thus, they can be changed (Salzinger & Gonsalves, 2024). According to this theory, women climbing the academic ladder is not only about individual merit but more about exposing and challenging gendered structures that hold them back. Concepts emanating from this theory, such as intersectionality (multiple identities like gender, age, and marital status that offer women experience in climbing the ladder), gendered organizations (university structures, policies, and cultures produce gender

inequalities that hinders women academic promotion), and academic capitalism (research productivity, grant application and execution, and publication performance, influence women's advancement). In addition, practices such as feminist leadership (inclusivity, collaboration, empowerment) and mentoring (guidance, career advice, networking opportunities, and psychosocial support), as well as policy reform (policies, procedures, practices), are essential in addressing gender inequalities. In this case, mentorship, networking, and collaboration opportunities make academic progression more equitable and open pathways for diverse women. In this regard, women's lived experiences produce unique, valuable, and empowering knowledge. In the context of this study, two participants not only tell their stories but also demonstrate that women can reach the highest academic rank. From the feminist standpoint, knowledge generated through women's experiences transforms, reshapes, and add understanding of what is possible for women in academia.

Resilience theory, conceptualized as a response to hardship, emanates from the work of Garnezy, Werner, and Masten in the 1970s and 2000s (Ungar, 2011). The theory assumes individuals achieve positive adaptation despite adversity. Thus, resilience is a function of personal capacities and environmental forces that buffer against stress and promote growth (Kumburu & Pande, 2022; Brown, 2026). This is because some women climb the ladder not because the situation is easy and the environment are favourable, but they are resilient in absorbing, adapting, and transforming themselves to ensure their survival and sustainability. This study draws from positive resilience, which focuses on how participants struggle to network, seek mentorship, balance time for work and family matters, and manage time in order to climb the academic ladder successfully. The two theories are preferred in this study because feminist theory explains structural and institutional barriers affecting climbing ladder affecting women, and resilience theory explains individual mechanisms women utilize in overcoming barriers while climbing the academic ladder.

METHODS

Research design

The study employed collaborative autoethnography, a qualitative research method in which two or more researchers collectively examine their shared their personal experiences to illuminate broader social realities. As Hernandez et al. (2017) explain, the method moves beyond individual self-reflection to produce narratives that are socially situated and collectively constructed. This approach was considered mostly appropriate for the study, given that women professors remain significantly underrepresented in Tanzanian higher education institutions. Sharing their promotion journeys to senior academic ranks, the two researcher-participants generate rich experiential data while also serving an inspirational purpose, offering a model for other women academicians who aspire to climb the academic ladder. Collaborative autoethnography has been successfully employed in previous research studies, including Anderson et al. (2020), Hernandez et al. (2015), and Hernandez et al. (2017), lending it established credibility within qualitative inquiry.

Informant selection

The study involved two participants, referred to as participants A and B to protect their identities. Both are women Associate Professors (APs). Participant A was the only woman Associate Professor at her university, while participant B was one of the only three APs at her institution. The two were purposively selected; both agreed, both recognizing the value of documenting and sharing their journeys to inspire fellow academics.

Data collection

The research began when one participant proposed the topic and the other agreed, both recognising the significance of documenting their experiences. Following this initial agreement, each participant independently narrated and documented her personal journey towards academic promotion over a period of three weeks. Each narrative traced key milestones, challenges, and turning points across her academic career from entry-level appointment to attainment of Associate Professorship. Writing independently allowed each participant to reflect candidly on her experience before they joined the discussion, preserving the authenticity of her individual voice ahead of collective analysis.

Data analysis

In the second stage, the two participants met to compare, discuss, and collectively analyse their documented narratives. Through this process of joint reflection, they identified the recurring patterns and points of convergence across their personal stories. Four major themes emerged from this collaborative analysis, which form the basis of the findings presented in this study. Finally, the iterative process of individual narration followed by collective meaning-making is central to the collaborative autoethnography, ensuring that the findings are collectively authentic and analytically grounded, while remaining true to the study's aim of inspiring other women academics through shared lived experience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Resilience and self-confidence

Both participants identified resilience and self-confidence as critical factors in their academic promotion. Academic promotion in higher education is a lengthy and demanding process that requires sustained engagement in core activities of teaching, research, and community services. Among these, during climbing academic ladder publications carry heavy weight and it was considered among participants as challenging.

The journey is characterized by repeated cycles of submission, peer review, rejection, and resubmission. Without resilience, it is extremely difficult to meet the target. Equally, self-confidence, attempt to climb the academic ladder through the uncertainty that often accompanies manuscript rejections. It is resilience to recover from rejections and sometimes the ability to deal with major comments and resubmission in the face of women's multiple tasks and other institutional barriers that enable them to meet criteria for climbing the academic ladder. The lived experiences of both women vividly illustrate this experience.

Participant B reflected on the importance of resilience: "You know it requires resilience when an article gets rejected. the most important thing is not to give up. Take the feedback, incorporate changes and resubmit elsewhere" (Participant B). Participant A offered a similarly determined perspective: "The most important thing is not to give up, even when you receive major corrections. Just incorporate the

changes, edit the manuscript and prepare matrix and resubmit on time" (Participant A).

Participant B further elaborated on her patience and self-belief: "I normally don't rush, I take time and wait..... once I have submitted my paper to those reputable and credible journal like Elsevier, Emerald or Sage.....you know that sometimes it may take like six month or even a year just to wait for the feedback if your paper passed desk review or not..... despite that I waitand wait and I don't compromise based on the time taken I belief on my own ability I know it will go through no matter the bulk of the comments that I will need to incorporate thereafter. In so doing I managed to publish in journals some belief they are difficult and especially for a woman" (Participant B).

The present study findings contradict previous studies in Sub-Saharan Africa, which have mainly focused on identifying barriers facing women in academia using qualitative interviews, case studies, or literature reviews (Liani et al., 2019; 2021; Labiso, 2020). In contrast. The present study reveals that resilience is not merely an emotional quality but a practical academic strategy. The ability to receive negative feedback, make revisions, and persist through repeated submission was part of their life towards their journey of climbing the academic ladder. Similarly, their confidence in terms of belief in their own abilities to succeed, competence, and capacity to successfully perform academic tasks was key in their academic progression. This collaborate the findings of Paz & López Aymes (2024) who found that academic resilience is critical in overcoming challenges particularly for women in academia as they struggle to climb academic ladder, Pillay-Naidoo & Nel (2022) who asserted that self-efficacy (confidence), significantly contribute to resilience and performance among women and Bachay & Cingel, (1999) who noted that resilience in women climbing the academic ladder involves self-efficacy, faith, and reframing obstacles. On the other hand, the findings contradict the findings of Cadete and Ruggunan (2024) high resilience alone doesn't imply that women experience supportive academic environments; structural barriers may persist despite individual resilience and confidence.

From feminist theoretical perspectives, the confidence demonstrated by both participants

challenges the deficit narrative that historically constructed women as lacking the resilience and confidence to climb senior academic ranks. In the context of this study, it reveals women confidence clearly matters. It shapes how they handle disappointing feedback from reviewers and sustain themselves from repeated rejections and resubmissions. Resilience theory complements this by framing participants' persistence through rejection and resubmission as adaptive strength cultivated under adversity. However, both theories caution that individual confidence and resilience, however admirable, cannot substitute for institutional responsibility to dismantle the structural barriers that women in Tanzanian academia continue to face on their journey to senior academic ranks.

Time management for balancing work and family responsibilities

Both participants highlighted time management as indispensable in balancing professional responsibilities with family obligations. They emphasised that without deliberate planning and clear demarcation between work time and family, achieving academic targets would be unattainable.

A recurring insight was the importance of setting realistic and structured timetables that protect dedicated writing time. Both women identified specific writing periods, including early morning, weekends, and holidays, as optimal for academic writing; these windows were free from fatigue and interruption on regular working days. To climb to senior academic positions, they admit to making deliberate strategies in balancing their time, prioritizing research activities, without forgetting to integrate family commitments. How they managed competing demands by working extra hard, diligently planning and putting emphasis on research and publications has been key in their academic progression; additionally, they delegate household responsibilities and manage their time effectively to maintain a balance between work and family life.

Participant A explained, "The best time is when you are not tired, either early morning or on weekends and holidays" (Participant A). Participant B emphasised: "You must set time and be intentional about prioritization. Also understand ...

not all social events you are supposed to attend" (Participant B).

Participant A explained, "Personally, I give my writing time the same priority as attending official engagements such as meetings and lectures" (Participant A). Participant A added: "I learn to delegate those household activities that do not require my direct involvement to partners, relatives and house helpers; this has been my coping mechanism over the past five years ...in so doing I get ample time to intensively engage in research and publication" (Participant A).

The reflection indicates strategic prioritization, including conscious decision not to attend every social decision event. In fact, time and mental space is vital in the process of academic writing for sustainable and quality output. This is in line with the study done by Raburu (2015) and Kwan et al. (2021), who noted that to climb the professional ladder, women in academics employed diverse strategies including working hard, time management, and focusing on research and publication for promotion purposes. Fatoki & Kobiowu (2015) concluded that delegation and active support from spouse/partner and relatives are very effective in reducing the effects of family responsibilities and thus enabling women in academia to concentrate on academic publication, which is a prerequisite for climbing the academic ladder.

Contrarily, Muleya (2023) revealed that promotion criteria in South African universities often disadvantage women because they fail to account for gendered domestic responsibilities and unequal professional expectations. In addition, he argued that individual and familial strategies are insufficient in overcoming deeply embedded institutional inequalities. The contradictions may be attributed to differences in contextual settings such as institutional gender cultures; unequal access to research resources and mentoring among universities and countries. This is in line with feminist theoretical perspectives that reflect the gendered nature of academic institutions, while resilience theory explains women's adaptive strategies as responses to structural constraints rather than indicators of equal opportunity.

Mentoring and collaboration

Both participants drew on mentorship and networks both within and beyond their institutions. Mentorship plays a formative role across multiple academic dimensions, including how to write effectively, how to identify and select appropriate journals, and how to respond to reviewers' comments. Participants also described mentoring and collaboration as transformative support during their struggle to climb the academic ladder. This support provided not only professional guidance but also psychosocial empowerment.

It was also revealed that one of these women often experiences isolation within working settings that were male-dominated. However, mentorship helped them develop a sense of belonging and fit within academia. As participant A explained: "Through training and mentorship, I developed skills and confidence to publish in high-impact journals previously thought were unreachable" (Participant A).

Similarly, participant B emphasized that mentorship was essential to her academic progress: "Mentorship was very crucial; making it this far wouldn't be possible. If it wasn't accessing mentorship... it was all due to strong mentorship both from within and outside institutions, both from male and female mentors (Participant B)

Participants A further highlighted how the mentor's share support created motivation and direction for advancement: "She always pushes me a lot, always asking where did you sent your papers for publications, how many point gained so far, when will you due for promotionshe pushed me a lot she always insisted You too can do this.... my mentor has given me confidence to do things I thought were beyond my reach" (Participant A).

The findings suggest that mentorship is crucial for women aspiring to climb the senior academic ladder, especially when they face social and structural challenges in academia. In line with this, empirical research shows that women who receive mentorship have significantly higher rates of promotion (68%) compared to (43%) without such support and proved to be successful in securing research grants (Bruce et al., 2022). Similar assertions were noted by Bruce et al. (2022, Carry et al (2019), and Yakar et al. (2024), who revealed that peer-mentoring coaching and sponsorship are

best practices in addressing barriers to advancement in academics.

In addition to formal and informal mentorship, both participants employed collaborative strategies. Collaboration reduces workload, facilitates peer learning, enables the pooling of expertise, and accelerates the pace of scholarly output. Where joint research was involved, co-authorship further strengthens academic profile and academic records.

Despite scholarly evidence indicating that women in academia frequently lack mentorship due to the scarcity of senior female academician (Cross et al., 2019; Shen et. al., 2022), participants in this study demonstrate resilience by actively seeking mentorship beyond their institutional boundaries. While this adaptive strategy aligns with resilience theory's emphasis on resourcefulness under diversity, it simultaneously exposes a structural contradiction highlighted by feminist theory: that women are compelled to compensate individually for institutionally produced inequalities, thereby relieving the institution of accountability for a creative, inclusive mentorship structure.

Professional development

Despite having the required academic qualifications, the participants demonstrated that they had acquired additional qualifications through various professional courses. One of the participants has obtained additional qualifications, such as certificates, diplomas, and postgraduate studies, while another participant was in the final stage of postdoctoral training. The participants explained that they pursued these additional qualifications as part of their professional development to broaden their expertise, develop multiple competencies, and expand their professional networks. According to them, these qualifications have strengthened their academic writing skills and enhanced their overall professional capacity.

Significantly, the participants were able to translate learning from professional development courses into research outputs. By applying newly acquired theoretical frameworks and methodological skills to their academic work, they improved the quality and publishability of their writing. This progressive growth strengthened their scholarly productivity and supported their movement toward higher academic ranks, including the position of AP. In this way, their professional development journey provides an inspiring model

for other women seeking to progress along their senior academic ladder.

Participant A further highlighted how professional development created motivation and direction for academic advancement, when she noted that “the training helped me stand out from the crowd and remain relevant in my field. I’m equipped with the current skills, abilities, and research ideas that significantly improved the quality and publishability of my academic work.”

Likewise, Participant B emphasized the role of professional development in strengthening scholarly productivity, stating that “the professional development opportunities grabbed enabled me to translate newly acquired theoretical and methodological skills into publishable research outputs. I now feel more confident in my academic work, remain relevant, and consistently apply what I have learned in advancing my scholarly writing.”

These findings are also aligned with prior research indicating that continuous professional development strengthens academic capacity through collaboration and improves research capability. In particular, the results are consistent with Dickfos (2019), who noted that continuous development can enhance academic collaboration. They also support Jean et al. (2019), who found that professional development contributes to research productivity among early-career academic neurosurgeons. Furthermore, the findings align with Patterson (2024), who explained that job or career, specific skills are often developed through training and professional development learning, rather than being fully taught during foundational schooling (Patterson, 2024).

On the other hand, Ragupathi (2022) emphasises that PD frequently focuses on participation rather than meaningful behavioural change, meaning new knowledge is not always translated into practice. This is mainly due to the fact that PD initiatives may have limited long-term influence on academic work, particularly where institutional support is weak. Without enabling environments such as mentoring, incentives, and workload adjustments, the transfer of learning from PD into research outputs remains limited, and thus PD does not automatically result in increased productivity, as structural and institutional constraints play a critical mediating role. This result aligns with feminist theory, which emphasises

women’s agency empowerment through access to opportunities that support professional growth. The findings also relate to resilience theory, since the participants sustained engagement in professional learning despite ongoing work responsibilities, reflecting persistence, adaptability and the capacity to continue producing academic outputs.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that women’s advancement to higher academic ranks is a function of individual agency, supportive relationships, and institutional conditions. Resilience and self-confidence emerged as essential attributes that enabled participants to navigate the challenges associated with publishing, including rejection, revision, and delayed feedback. Rather than viewing these experiences as setbacks, participants adopted adaptive strategies that transformed them into opportunities for learning and growth. Effective time management was also critical; participants deliberately balanced research, teaching, administrative duties, and family responsibilities.

Mentorship, collaboration, and continuous professional development further facilitated academic progression by providing technical guidance, emotional support, networking opportunities, and enhanced research and writing skills. However, this is not linear, as they are often constrained by heavy workloads, limited institutional support, and unequal access to opportunities. Generally, women’s academic progression extends beyond qualifications and experience and is influenced by broader structural conditions. Accordingly, universities should strengthen mentorship programmes, promote continuous professional development, adopt gender-sensitive workload policies, encourage collaborative research, provide resources for research dissemination, and incorporate resilience and academic skills development into staff development initiatives to support sustainable career advancement

The practical implication of this study is that women in academics should strategically integrate resilience, time management, mentorship, collaboration, and professional development to enhance research productivity and career progression. Individual planning must balance publication targets, teaching and administrative

responsibilities. Further, they should leverage academic networks beyond institutional boundaries. At the policy level, higher education institutions and the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology must establish structured mentorship systems, provide sustained funding for professional development, and recognise enabling processes alongside publication outputs. Gender-responsive policies, equitable access to research resources, and quality assurance frameworks that assess the impact of professional development are essential for promoting sustainable academic advancement.

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