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RESEARCH ARTICLE

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TOWARDS THE LOW REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN ZIMBABWEAN SCHOOLS: A CASE STUDY OF NKAYI NORTH CIRCUIT

Theminkosi Tshabalala and Tichaona Mapolisa

1. Theminkosi Tshabalala- Senior Lecturer and Programme Leader for the Master of Education in Educational Management in the Faculty of Arts and Education at the Zimbabwe Open University
2. Tichaona Mapolisa-Associate Professor and Acting Chairperson for the Department of Educational Studies in the Faculty of Arts and Education at the Zimbabwe Open University.

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Abstract

Women still hold fewer positions of responsibility when it comes to leadership in organisations such as schools in most developing countries (Johnson, 2010). In Zimbabwe, the government has put in place policies that encourage and promote the elevation of women into top positions of leadership. For example, it promulgated the National Gender Policy in 2004 to promote the advancement of women in all sectors (National Gender Policy, 2004). This was a result of the realisation that women constitute 52% of the population and yet, in terms of representation in leadership positions across all sectors, they constituted less than 30% (Makoni, 2011). A study of women in educational leadership positions in education undertaken by Brown and Ralph (2006) indicated that women were making little progress in achieving equity with men in attaining leadership positions. Ozigi (2004) observed that the education system still remains overwhelmingly male at the top levels with a few females in positions of authority in most countries. As Evetts (2009) lamented, "leadership positions in the education sector still remain the men's club to some extent." Against the background of a literature review which examines representation of women teachers in leadership positions, this article draws on a qualitative inquiry of factors contributing toward the low representation of women in leadership positions in a small sample of 30 teachers and heads of schools from the Nkayi North West Circuit in Nkayi District in Matabeleland North in Zimbabwe, selected by means of purposeful sampling. The research adopted a qualitative methodology using a case study design. Data were gathered by means of semi-structured interviews using an interview guide. Views of the respondents were audio-taped, transcribed and became the primary data for analysis. The findings indicated that there are many subtle barriers that hinder the elevation of women into senior leadership positions. The government has promulgated very positive policies for women advancement and yet has ignored the cultural and social practices that negate women advancement. The study also revealed that there are few women teachers with the requisite qualifications to take up leadership positions. The study recommends that women should be conscientised about policies put in place by the government for their advancement in the work place and women should be encouraged to study to attain higher qualifications for eligibility for promotion.

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Introduction

The need for women in leadership positions in schools is important to provide role models for adolescent girls and also to address issues of social justice and gender equity (Shakeshaft, 2006). Sex roles, stereotyping and career mapping of women emerge as strong barriers to female entry into positions which have traditionally been associated with men particularly in management positions (Davis, 2012). In spite of the concerted efforts by government in developing countries (including Zimbabwe) to come up with policies meant to advance women into top leadership positions, there is still a huge difference between the number of men and women in leadership positions in favour of men. In Zimbabwe, the government prioritises the advancement of women in all sectors of the economy in general and in education in particular and yet, the imbalance refuses to go. Women constitute 52% of the population in Zimbabwe and a similar figure represents women in the teaching profession (Makombe, 2009). Yet in spite of their numbers in the teaching field, they constitute a paltry 27% of administrators in the education sector of Zimbabwe (Chivore, 2005). It is on account of this information that this study set out to explore the factors that contribute to the low representation of women in leadership positions in Zimbabwean schools.

Literature Review

In diverse societies and cultures, different social organisational structures, economic and political factors act at different levels as barriers to female participation in management (Luke and Gore, 2012). Common to all societies seems to be an implicit belief that male and female differences compulsively imply female inferiority (Best, 2003). Ozigi (2004) states that sex roles, stereotyping and career mapping of women emerge as strong barriers to female advancement into positions which have traditionally been associated with men, particularly management positions.

Davies (2012) argues that women's career mapping appears to be affected by motherhood issues and responsibilities of looking after the family. Actually, women by entering into management posts add to their responsibilities and later re-entry into a job may decrease motivation and opportunity to progress (Davidson and Cooper, 2012). Another explanation of female under-representation in management is perceived to be female role-socialisation at home (Al-Khalifa, 2002). In the family, the female child is socialised into stereotypical feminist: to be timid, obedient, silent and soft. Interestingly, none of these qualities is associated with attributes of managers or leaders in the main stream definitions evolving from male experience.

According to Davies (2012), females need to be persuaded to take management responsibilities and constantly examine their leadership abilities. Women emerge as competent as men in many research studies and their opting to stay out of management jobs to some extent is explained by maintaining that they wrongly presume the universality of male experience (Shakeshaft, 2006).

Another barrier is that in our male-dominated societies, men find it hard to accept women in positions of authority when in a professional context which suggests home to job transferring of role relationships (Evetts, 2009). Male dominance in the domestic setting is replayed in the professional sphere. Al-Khalifa (2002) quoted a male teacher who said, "it irritates me to have a woman in a position of authority over me" arguing that "rejection of women's leadership ... is .. a standpoint shared by many men." This, therefore, implies that aspiring women do not have to fight only against structural barriers but also social patterns and cultural norms.

One other factor which may act as a hindrance for women considering leadership positions in schools is the lack of role models and mentors in educational leadership (Johnson, 2010). According to Johnson (2010), those women that are in leadership positions may be breaking new ground and unable to offer the mentoring and encouragement to other women that may find it necessary to overcome their lack of self confidence and esteem. Other women in leadership positions may be so beset with problems created by resentful teachers both male and female, who are unwilling to accept a woman 'boss' that the example they provide does not encourage other women to undertake the same trial by ordeal (Best, 2003).

Statement of the Problem

The study sought to find out the factors or causes that lead to a disproportionately low representation of women with reference to posts of school heads and deputy heads in spite of the numerous policies that the government has formulated to remove all forms of discrimination against women in the work place. It seems that, generally, women are reluctant to utilise the myriad of legislation put in place for their benefit. There is need to investigate the barriers that lead to lack of promotion of women teachers.

Purpose of the Study

The study sought to investigate the barriers that hinder women from taking leadership positions in the Zimbabwean school system.

Research Questions

The study sought to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the factors that hinder the participation of women in leadership positions in the schools?
2. Why is it important for women to take leadership positions in schools?
3. Do women leaders in schools perform their duties as effectively as their male counterparts?
4. How can women be encouraged to take leadership positions in the schools?

Significance of the Study

The importance of this study stemmed from the fact that it sought to expose the major barriers that inhibit women teachers from occupying senior management positions in the schools. A lot of literature has been written about the challenges faced by women teachers in management positions from other countries, particularly developed countries. There is very inadequate literature about Zimbabwe and this study would like to close that gap. It was also hoped that the study would proffer possible suggestions to help women advance within the education sector.

Limitations of the Study

The study is limited to those factors that contribute to the low representation of women in leadership positions in Zimbabwean schools using a very small sample. The study is thus, no more than a snap shot of the barriers that inhibit female teachers from taking leadership positions in a specific setting. Clearly, the findings cannot be generalised but they alert one to challenges that aspiring women teachers experience using a small sample.

Delimitations of the Study

The researcher delimited the investigation to establishing the factors that inhibit the rise of women into leadership positions in one circuit in Nkayi District of Zimbabwe. Other challenges that women encounter in the school system were outside the purview of this study.

Research Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative methodology and made use of a case study research design. The methodology and the design were selected because they afforded the teachers the opportunity to live their experiences in their daily operations. The population consisted of all teachers and female heads in the Nkayi North West Circuit in Nkayi District in Matabeleland North which has a population of 200 teachers and 20 heads of schools. A circuit is an area under the jurisdiction of an Education Inspector in Zimbabwe. Purposive sampling was used to select a sample of thirty teachers and heads. Purposive sampling was chosen because as Kumar (2008) observes, its advantage is that the researcher can use his/her research skill and prior knowledge to choose respondents.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were gathered by means of semi-structured interviews lasting twenty minutes using an interview guide. All interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and became the primary data source for analysis conducted by the researcher. The aim was to understand experiences from the participants' point of view. No attempt was made to generalise the findings or prove hypotheses. A transparent disclosure of the role of the researcher and his or her relationship with the participants, the 'volunteering' of participants and description of the women teachers' settings was done to contextualise the research and to allow for the impact of the researcher role and participant selection on findings. The use of a small sample is common in qualitative research, where the aim is depth and not breadth.

Findings and Discussion

The study sought to investigate the factors contributing towards the low representation of women in leadership positions in Zimbabwean schools. This section is presented in two parts; namely, demographic data and actual findings.

Demographic Data

Table 1: Categories of respondents (N = 30)

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Teachers	25	83
Heads	5	17
Total	30	100

Table 1 above shows categories of respondents used for the study. The majority of the respondents (83%) were teachers and heads constituted 17% of the sample.

Table 2: Distribution of research participants by sex (N = 30)

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	10	33
Female	20	67
Total	30	100

As table 2 reveals, 67% of the respondents were female and 33% were male. The datum was considered statistically significant to the extent that it confirmed the hypothesis that more teachers in Zimbabwean schools are of female gender. For example, Makoni (2011) on a study of gender composition of teachers in Hwange District in Zimbabwe, found that 69% of the teachers in Hwange schools were female.

Table 3: Composition of respondents by approximate age (N = 30)

Age in years	Frequency	Percentage
Below 30	15	50
31 – 40	10	33
41 - 50	5	17
Total	30	100

The majority of the respondents (83%) were below 40 years. The significance of this statistic is that they still have more years of service as either teacher or heads, making their opinions about women leadership very significant.

Table 4: Professional qualifications of respondents (N = 30)

Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
Certificate in Education	5	17
Diploma in Education	21	70
Bachelors Degree	4	13
Masters Degree	0	0
Total	30	100

The table above shows that the majority of the respondents (70%) were in possession of a Diploma in Education qualification. A few were in possession of a degree qualification which is currently the requirement for a teacher to be promoted to the post of head. The datum is considered of statistical significance in that it implies that since the majority of teachers in the schools are female (Makoni, 2011) the majority of them do not possess the requisite qualification for promotion as heads of schools.

Actual Research Findings

According to international literature, women still occupy fewer positions of leadership in organisations such as schools. This inquiry suggests that positions of leadership in schools are easier to obtain by men than by women. In the study, it was found that some of the factors that hindered female participation in school leadership included the following: lack of confidence by the female teachers hence they did not apply for the advertised posts; women were said to be selective in the choice of schools they preferred and did not want to venture in other provinces or different environments from the ones they are used to; women were said to have a nagging fear of leading subordinates who were not supportive or appreciative of female heads; the challenges faced by current female heads discouraged the aspiring ladies from applying.

The study also revealed that most of the respondents appreciated the participation of women in school leadership positions. The respondents were of the opinion that the presence of women in leadership in schools is important because among other reasons, it ensures social justice by providing gender equity between adults within the education profession; it also provides the girl child beginning to consider career choices with role models of women decision makers. The respondents also stated that women constituted a greater proportion of the teachers and therefore, they had to equally be involved in leadership. This information tallies very well with findings from Makoni (2011) who discovered that in some provinces of Zimbabwe, women constituted 69% of the teaching force.

The study revealed that respondents felt that women were competent and fully understood their duties and roles when in leadership positions. It was also revealed that they were good listeners, punctual for work and exercised shared decision making most of the time. The women leaders were said to be more committed to work and very personal in communication by more than 50% of the respondents. Davidson and Cooper (2012) found that women managers were tolerant, motherly, democratic and amenable to advice from subordinates than men, which is in congruent with the perceptions of respondents in this study.

However, it was also established that female heads needed advice on a number of areas where they exhibited weaknesses. Respondents highlighted that female heads should avoid overreliance on the grapevine; build more confidence in their interaction with stakeholders and avoid emotionalism in dealing with uncooperative subordinates.

The study also revealed that society was gradually accepting women leaders in schools in spite of the cultural barriers that hindered women advancement. However, some female heads indicated that some males still felt threatened by women who were in top leadership positions and this created unnecessary tension between the female head and the male teachers.

The study also revealed that most respondents felt that there was need for more awareness campaigns to motivate female teachers to take up leadership positions. Respondents also emphasised the importance of reading for higher qualifications by women teachers if ever they wanted to compete on an equal footing with men. There was also a suggestion that interview panels for promotion posts in the Ministry of Education should observe gender balance.

Conclusions

Given the background of the above findings, the researcher makes the following conclusions:

- Female teachers lacked confidence hence they did not apply for promotion posts.
- Most of the ladies were very selective on the choice of schools and environments they wanted to work in, thereby limiting their promotion prospects.
- The majority of respondents believed that female teachers were generally timid and afraid of leading other teachers particularly male ones.
- Most teachers of both sexes appreciated the need to have female heads so as to motivate the girls in the schools to pursue their studies.

- There was as evidence that female heads were relatively competent and democratic in their leadership roles.
- Female leaders relied heavily on information from the grapevine than formal channels.
- Some of the female leaders are said to be very emotional and unstable.
- The findings revealed that society was gradually accepting female leaders in schools.
- Findings of the study seem to confirm that female teachers do not have the requisite qualifications to take up promotion posts.

Recommendations

In light of the findings of this study, the researcher would like to make some recommendations.

- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary schools should come up with a deliberate policy of appointing female teachers on acting capacities and induct them so as to build their confidence so that they can apply for advertised posts.
- Lady teachers who qualify should be encouraged and advised to apply for promotion posts wherever they arise so as to increase their chances of getting promoted instead of being too selective as is the norm now.
- District Education Officers should organise refresher courses on leadership and management for female heads so as to boost their confidence and competencies.
- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should create programmes to assist female teachers acquire degrees so that more of them can qualify for promotion.
- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should continue to promote more women teachers since both male and female teachers as well as communities seem to appreciate the leadership role played by female heads in the schools.

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