

Challenges Facing Women in School Leadership Positions: Experiences from a District in Zimbabwe

G. N. Shava Dr F. N. Tlou Dr M Mpofu

National University of Science and Technology, Faculty of Science and Technology Education Bulawayo
Zimbabwe

Abstract

Successful educational leadership entails possessing the knowledge, skills and understanding of effective leadership skills along with the personal ability to effectively implement those skills. In Zimbabwe the occupational and leadership status of women in general is still suffering a wide gap, as there is unequal representation in leadership positions between men and women. This study, conducted in a rural district in Zimbabwe, aimed at understanding the challenges facing women in school leadership positions. In this article we argue that there are cultural, social and structural domains among others that impede the effective operations of women in school leadership positions. Using a qualitative research paradigm, six schools in one rural district were chosen for the study. A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect data from six female heads - three from primary schools and three from secondary schools. Focus group discussions were held with teachers from the same schools. The study established that there are cultural, structural, economic and social barriers facing women in school leadership positions. We recommend that different strategies should be set up for developmental programs for women in leadership positions.

Keywords: Women in leadership, female school heads, school leadership, challenges facing women, women in school leadership positions

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Introduction

School leadership requires multiple strategies and abilities, whether assumed by men or women. Education systems are ever changing and these changes demand for visionary school leaders to understand that its culture is rigid, inhibiting and progressive. According to Gardner, Enomoto and Gronan (2000) leadership is the process of persuasion by which an individual or leadership team induces a group to pursue objectives held by the leader. This definition does not specify or give suggestions for how women should lead to address specific issues that are related to female leadership. Leadership involves inducing followers to act towards achieving goals that represent the values, motivations, wants, needs and the aspirations of both the leader and the followers. Women school leadership in Zimbabwe and the world over faces many challenges that stand in the way to provide for successful school leadership.

A United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) report in Ramsey (2000) found out that globally, women were grossly underrepresented in education management, with men outnumbering women with about five to one at middle management level. Women on the other hand have limited ambitions, they lack confidence in themselves and their work is affected by discontinuity in the workplace (Abu-Khader, 2012). The purpose of this article is to understand the major challenges faced by women in school leadership positions, with specific reference to schools in one district in Zimbabwe.

Women in leadership - the wider concept

Among the concerns of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNFEM) and United Nations International Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF) (2002) are the elimination of all forms of prejudice and discrimination against women, especially in assuming leadership positions in preservation of the woman's rights and her role in the inclusive development. In response to the concerns of UNFEM and UNICEF, there has been a considerable expansion in the role of women in school leadership. Prior to these developments, the attainment of independence in Zimbabwe in 1980 also marked radical changes towards achieving gender equity. The government alluded to several national and international gender declarations and conventions. These include but are not limited to the 1965 Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and the 1979 United Nations Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women [CEDAW] (Chabaya, Rembe & Wadesango, 2009). Responding to the conventions, several policy initiatives were put into place in Zimbabwe, for example the Affirmative Action Policy of 1992, the Public Service Commission Circular No 11 of 1992, the Public Service Commission Circular No 22 of 1996, the Public Service Commission Circular No 1 of 1997 and the National Gender Policy of 2004 (Chabaya, et al, 2009). In all these policies and circular initiatives, the key issues were on the elimination of negative social, political, cultural and structural practices that impede equality and equity of gender and the promotion of equal opportunities for both men and women in

leadership positions.

The roles and skills of women leaders have received attention by researchers and practitioners in education all over the world (Omair, 2008; Stead and Eliot, 2009). This growing interest is triggered by the importance of leadership as an essential element to the survival of the education system and as an instrumental factor in striving for excellence (Stead and Eliot 2009; Gronan and Shakeshaft, 2011). Studies conducted by Al- Hussein (2011), Chabaya, et al., (2009) and Martin (2011) established that women have distinct leadership traits and skills in leading especially educational institutions, even though they face certain difficulties and challenges that impede their leadership effectiveness. These studies have shown that women school leaders have leadership characteristics that may not exist in men. Choge (2015:1) and Hefferan, (2008) maintain that, “while rural women are often silent, hidden and under-appreciated, they represent probably the world’s most powerful untapped natural resource, and they are surely more than ever before a key to world stability and understanding”. It is evident from Zulu’s (2011) study that women leadership is characterized by strong communication skills, information power and share leadership, as well as the participatory style of work.

The theoretical framework

The extensive literature seeking to explain persistent challenges facing women in leadership have focused attention on three sets of factors, emphasizing the impact of culture, structure and social barriers all which affect the aspiration of women. Based on the social role, women are typically described and expected to be more communal, relation oriented and nurturing than men. The social role theory argues that individual development descriptive and prescriptive gender role expectations based on gender- based division of labour. This division of labour has traditionally and culturally associated men with bread winner position and women with home maker position responsible for the family (Eagly, 2005). On the other hand the feminist analysis assume that women’s oppression is inscribed in the positioning of women in the social, structural and cultural context. The theoretical framework for this study incorporated feminist and socio- cultural theories for conceptualising epistemological viewpoints of women and the challenges they face in their school leadership positions (Bernal, 2002; Collin, 2003). The feminist and socio- cultural theories challenge the dominant discourses in structure, culture and processes that dialectically (Bernal, 2002) marginalise women leaders. The figure below illustrates the theoretical framework used in this study.

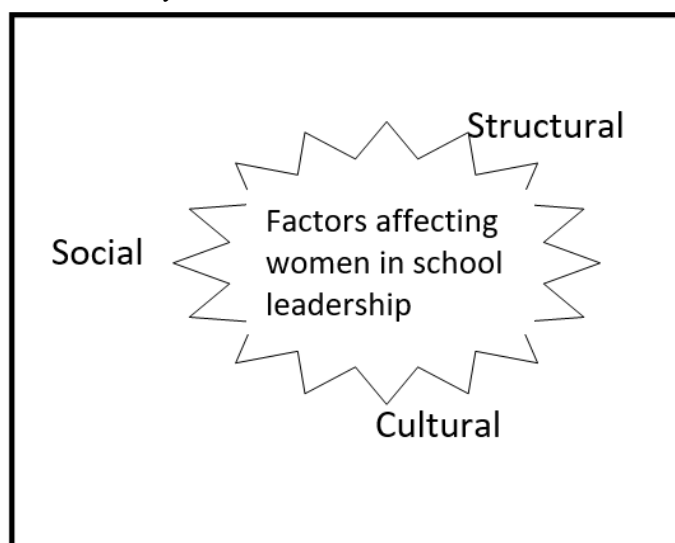


Figure 1: Women in leadership framework

Social/ socio-political aspects hindering women in leadership

Despite the considerable expansion and promotion of women to leadership positions, the review of literature established that women are facing a different reality from their male counterparts, due to various structural, social and cultural factors that impede their effectiveness as leaders. Amenkash, Abdulaziz, Shaman, Haijan & Dagsh, (2007) and Martin (2011) argue that, while overt gender discrimination is no longer as prevalent the world over, it is being replaced by more subtle forms of institutional discrimination in the form of institutional practices, structural arrangements, cultural ideologies and gendered roles which recreate patriarchal ideologies that are oppressive to women. Institutional discrimination refers to the policies, practices, norms and traditions of the dominant racial, ethnic or gender group and the implementation of policies that disadvantage one social group for the advantage of another group (Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey, 2010). Another form of institutional discrimination involves gender roles, a practice that marginalizes women in less appreciated professional

activities, such as teaching infant classes. On the other hand structural discrimination involves policies and actions that are neutral in intent, yet impairs other groups of people (Pincus, 2003). Martin (2011) and Klein (2007) remark that other challenges facing women in leadership positions include a negative institutional climate, patriarchal leadership, an absence of peer mentoring and networking, a lack of understanding of the unwritten rules of organizational culture and the need to develop a professional communication.

Psychologists have noted that prescriptive gender stereotyping assumptions about the roles that women play often conflict with the role of leadership (Prime, Carter & Welbourne 2009). Women leaders are often seen as violating their prescribed feminine roles, while men in leadership positions are perceived as acting in compliance with their prescribed masculine roles (Prime, et al., 2009). In the view of Martin (2011) gender labelling is particularly problematic. For example, men who assert themselves as strong leaders are respectfully addressed as the “boss”, whereas women with similar traits may be called a disparaging name. Ideologies of male supremacy are so ingrained in many countries that they are taken as the natural order of things, while suggestions to establish new definitions are rejected as ludicrous, illogical or an attack on cultural norms (Stromquist, 2006).

Thus home and family responsibilities provide obstacles for women in administration as head teachers because of their femininity, the women not only must effectively juggle all her tasks, she must also contend with the bulk of male school boards presidents who erroneously believe that not only is she unable to manage the balancing act but that it is inappropriate for her to even attempt it (Shakeshaft, 1989).

Cultural aspects hindering women in leadership

Research conducted by Wilkinson (1996) found that women leaders worldwide share a number of challenges which include stereotyping, lack of role models and the lack of access to training. Furthermore Stead and Eliots' study in the Arab Gulf countries found that the challenges faced by women in leadership positions include discrimination at work, cultural taboos, negative attitudes towards working women and lack of confidence and trust in women leaders. Cook (2007) also identified several inhibiting factors for women that include organisational factors, such as personnel systems, traditional career paths, male employee attitudes and women's own attitudes. Cook (2007) further argues that culture which is reflected in the set of beliefs, values, practices and norms associated with the local community as well as in the workplace, can adversely affect the operation of women leaders and their ability to exercise a positive leadership role. Some traditional beliefs are reflected in associating leadership abilities and positions with men and not women (Effindi, 2003, Metcalfe, 2008 and Coleman, 2001). The cultural identification of women as caring, domestic as and implicitly of lesser importance and status than men needs to be examined (Coleman, 2000, 2001). Culture reflected in the set of beliefs and practices associated with the local community, as well as in the workplace, can adversely reflect on the effectiveness of women leaders and their ability to exercise a positive leadership role.

Structural aspects hindering women in leadership

Evidence indicates that women leaders in Saudi Arabia face a number of structural challenges, including limited authority, which is disproportionate to the size of their responsibilities (Almenkash et al., add 2007; Al-Halawani, 2003). Lack of empowerment can be another challenge facing women in school leadership which is reflected in their inability to influence the decision-making processes and achieve organisational goals (Metcalfe, 2008). According to Effindi (2003) empowerment enhances the moral and physical sense of belonging and affiliation with the organisation giving a positive effect on the attitude of the individual and hence feelings of appreciation and importance to the institution. There is therefore an indication that several structural factors, some of which are associated with the personality of women leaders and their social circumstances, may hinder their ability to fully and effectively exercise their leadership roles in schools.

The social, cultural and structural theory has focused on the oppression of women and aim to understand the nature of gender equality. Social and cultural factors position women within an interlocking system (Stanley, 2009) of gender which in turn can create disempowerment experiences for leaders in organisations. Grosz (2010) states that the cultural, social and structural theory and in conjunction with feminist philosophy share concern about a common subject of analysis. According to the cultural, social and structural perspectives on women in leadership which are most dominant, the traditional approaches to leadership have focused on serving and have indeed adaptive leadership and transformational leadership (Parker 2005) These factors place the power, policies and structures that maintain the domination of women at its centre and acknowledges the broader cultural factors affecting women's lives. According to the Affirmative Action Policy of 1992 of Zimbabwe, the main objective of the government included engendering all institutions of the state, increasing the number of women occupying senior leadership positions in government institutions and transforming gender relations embedded in cultural social and structural relations.

Research Methodology

A qualitative research methodology and interviews were used to understand the meaning participants made of

their world and their experience (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007; Silverman, 2014). The District Education Officer (in charge of the district) assisted in identifying and selecting six schools for the paper. These schools were made up of three primary schools and three secondary schools and were selected based on their respective heads accepting to take part in the research. The six schools are headed by female heads with varying experience as head or deputy head. Qualitative research is the kind of study that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures, but rather a phenomenological inquiry which uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand the phenomenon in a context specific setting, like a school (Creswell, 2007; Berge, 2009; Bogdan & Knopp, 2002). According to Berge (2009), Silverman, (2014) and Charmaz (2006) interpretivist approach assume that reality is constructed inter-subjectively through the meanings and understandings developed socially and experientially. The method adopted in this paper ensured an adequate dialogue between the researchers and research participants or those who were interacted with in order to collaboratively construct a meaningful reality (Silverman, 2014). One of the researchers understood and could speak the language of the participants.

Qualitative data was collected in March 2015 through semi structured interviews with the heads and focus group discussions with purposively selected teachers. The focus group discussion helped the researchers to collect data quickly and conveniently from the teachers who willingly participated. This was an excellent means of collecting information from participants. The focus group sizes were kept at not more than six participants, which is in line with Silverman (2014) who suggested that for complex problems focus group size should be kept to no more than seven participants. During this time, the head referred to as (H1) to (H6) and a purposively selected group of six teachers was interviewed. Schools were coded as (PS1) to (PS3) for primary schools and (SS1) to (SS3) for secondary schools. Focus groups were also coded as (FG1) to (FG6). The coding was done to protect the identity of schools and participants. We decided to limit the number of interview questions to six to enable the participants to focus on the research questions. The interview questions focused on the key issues under investigation, namely female headship, cultural challenges, structural factors and school leadership. Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method because of its ability to capture experiences of participants in their own words - an approach highly consistent with constructivist position (Charmaz, 2000). The study was guided by the following research questions.

- What are the major challenges faced by women in school leadership positions?
- In what ways, if any, do structural factors affect the operations of school heads?
- What are the major differences in leadership styles between men and women?
- What are the effects, if any, of women's leadership styles in the schools?
- What are the cultural and social factors affecting women in educational leadership positions?

The analysis of the data was done using qualitative content analysis (Charmaz, 2006 & 2000).

Research site

The six schools sampled for the study are located in different parts of Mberengwa rural district in Zimbabwe. Mberengwa district is in the Midlands province and the main economic activity in the district is peasant farming with most young people mainly involved in gold panning. Because of its bordering with Beitbridge district, most young people have migrated into South Africa for greener pastures. Most of the schools are served by poor communities and most of these communities exhibit a range of problems including poverty, persistent droughts and other acute social and economic problems. As indicated before, the study was carried out in six schools comprising of three primary schools and three secondary schools. The six schools have female heads and all their deputies are male teachers.

Results and discussion

Major challenges faced by female heads

Women frequently serve longer as heads of schools and in the teaching service and they encounter multiple obstacles to their effective operations in these positions. When the study participants were asked to explain the major challenges faced by women in school leadership positions, a number of interview participants, including focus group discussions participants, pointed out that woman in school leadership positions face challenges related to:

- Negative attitudes of school community towards women as school heads
- Family attachment and family roles
- Lack of support from community members, including teachers
- Social cultural barriers in the school environment
- Low self-esteem and the general lack of confidence among women school heads
- Organisational structures in the schools
- Gender stereotypes against women
- Institutional discrimination

- Patriarchal leadership structures in society.

The six female heads of schools interviewed all noted that women who are heads of schools encounter numerous dilemmas as both parents and heads of schools. Family attachments and especially taking care of children was found to be the major barrier to women effectiveness in school leadership positions. Some women are not prepared to take school leadership positions especially in a situation where they will be away from their husbands and families. This finding is in line with Dorsey (1996) who argued that, from an early stage of child development, girls are groomed towards their marriage roles of wife, mother and family caretaker. One of the heads (SS2) said the following about family attachment:

Most of us lady teachers do not want to move away from our families. The moment I am separated from my husband and family I feel lost and isolated and this will affect my work out put. It was much easier for me when I was a spinster, I could move from one school to the other and I liked that, I had no problem with that, but now I cannot leave this school which is nearest to my home and my other relatives.

Another interviewee from (FG2) had the following opinion: "I am not prepared to take a school leadership position especially when it means to move away from my husband and children".

These responses show that women are so much attached to their families and preference to stay with their family discouraged some female teachers from seeking for promotion to school head, especially if it meant that they would stay away from their families. Similarly, another participant from a focus group (FG3) expressed her position with regards to family attachment:

There is no way I can leave my husband and children to go and isolate myself in a remote school like Chambapire Primary (pseudonym). After all ladies and gentleman (in Shona) 'Murume chikwama chemari anochengetwa muhapwa (in Ndebele) 'Indoda yisikwama semali iya nqwinwa ekwapeni' (in English) 'A husband is like a purse of money, you keep it under your armpit'.

The above responses suggest that women would rather stay in lower positions as long as they remain with their husbands and children. They value their marriages more than anything. These responses clearly demonstrate the dilemma lady teachers face when it comes to making decisions related to leaving their spouses and families to take up a position as a head, especially in a school where she cannot go with her husband and children. There is an indication that lady teachers may want to be promoted and learn more, but their family situation becomes a hindrance to their decisions to take school leadership positions. This finding from the focus group points to the fact that the role of looking after children in the family is mainly for women and men have their own responsibilities other than taking care of children. A woman from the same focus group (FG2) had the following to say:

In Shona: Vana vangu zvipo kubva kuna mwari (Put in English): My children are gifts from God" and I cannot leave these gifts to take a school leadership position where I will stress myself due to isolation. I enjoy being with my children, to see them go to school and see them back from school. This gives me some motivations to work here closer to my relatives.

The participants argued that women are finding it difficult to move away from their families to take leadership positions. In situations where these women move, their effectiveness is compromised due to isolation and lack of motivation. Women in school leadership positions struggle with unfair elitist culture, a lack of mentors and role models and tensions between work, family and community (Armenti, 2004; Cooper, Eddy, Hart, Lester, & Eudey 2007; Wolfinger, Maso & Goulden, 2009). Many women in school leadership positions face the multiple challenges of being female, leaders and mothers at the same time. In this context it is argued that balancing work and family responsibilities is a major hurdle for women in school leadership positions. While family responsibilities may influence the careers of all parents, women, especially those with new-born babies and pre-school children may have disproportionate work in caring for the children and also making a significant contribution to the achievement of school organisational goals. Armenti (2004) describes the irony women face as their child bearing years parallel their journey in the school leadership. Family care issues have a more negative impact on promotion and work effectiveness of women than that of men, since women have a disproportionate share of domestic duties (Cooper et al., 2007; Gronan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Martin, 2011; Dominicia, Fried & Zeger, 2009)

As women begin to take leadership positions in schools, striking a balance between family life and school leadership roles become a problem. Armenti (2004) confirms that striking a balance between family life and school leadership roles becomes controversial when women ascend to higher positions. These interview responses from all participants demonstrate the challenges female heads face in making decisions about taking leadership positions in schools.

Socio-cultural factors affecting women in school leadership positions

Collectively, participants in this study highlighted that culture reflected in the set of beliefs, roles, values, norms and practices in the schools and the local communities affected women's execution of leadership roles. Traditional beliefs are reflected in associating leadership positions in schools with men and not women. The cultures and customs of the tribal community prevailing in the area contribute to the conservative orientation towards women. In each interview, participants expressed that men are always dominating women at the work place due to cultural backgrounds. One of the school heads (SS3) had the following to say: "There are certain cultural issues we cannot overcome and they will continue to affect us women in leadership positions as long as we remain in our African society. In our Shona culture men are 'here' while women are 'there'." Using her hands to show the different levels of men and women in society, she went on to highlight that:

Some of these cultural issues are not easy to change even if we women seek to have such negative cultures to change, even when I and my young brother or husband visit our neighbour, they will give my brother or my husband a chair to sit on and give me a mat to sit on the floor and there is nothing wrong with that we accept it as it is. This is a condition of how society regards men over women and we cannot change that.

In another interview a newly appointed head (PS2) mentioned that:

We lady teachers in school leadership positions face challenges especially when the community associates the position of head with man and especially when the school had been operating with male heads for a long time.

She narrated an event when one of the community members came to the school seeking to see the head and when she told him that she was the head, the man could not understand why a lady teacher was a head of the school. The head mistress ended up directing the man to the male deputy head and from the deputy head the man got everything that he wanted from the school. "Had it been that the school deputy was female, we were going to see some drama I suspect (she explained), the man did not want to tell his problem to a lady head teacher."

The above responses from the participants show that society associates the position of head with man and the moment there is a female head teacher, this does not augur well with members of the community. To them there is no such term as head "mistress" but head "master" because according to this newly appointed head the man insisted that he wanted to see the head master and not one of the mistresses in the school. He did not know of the existence of a head mistress. In the words of Lagan (1999:4) "culturally defined desirable feminine behaviour is nurturing and caring for others, placing importance on relationships and the quality of life", rather than leading organisations. To most men a woman cannot be the head of an organisation as much as she cannot be the head of a family, unless in the absence of a man (Shava and Ndebele 2014). On the other hand Effendi (2003) asserts that probably the single most important hurdle for women in management in developing countries is the persistent stereotype that associates management to male positions. It is also argued that, because most Zimbabwean cultures are patriarchal, most societies and organisations, including schools, have in fact placed women in a passive role at work and even in the family. Due to patriarchal orientations it is unacceptable for a woman to lead an organisation where there are men. The culture and customs of tribal communities assume that men should lead while women should follow.

Structural factors affecting women in school leadership positions

Structural factors include physical and technical challenges related to the work environment and technical issues that limit the ability of the women leader to achieve educational goals. Structural factors can also include organisational challenges related to the administrative organisation that may hinder the school leadership to achieve the objectives of the institution (Abu-Khader, 2012; Al-Kubasisi, 2004; Al-Mingash, 2007). Structural challenges may also include the under-empowerment factors that limit the ability of school heads on taking the right decisions and eliciting the change required to realise success and distinction in performing leadership roles (Abu-Khader, 2012). As noted in the literature review of the paper, structural discrimination involves policies and actions that are neutral in intent, yet disadvantages other groups of people in an organisation (Pincus, 2003). According to Omar and Davidson (2001) structural factors can present an important challenge to women leaders due to managerial and organisational practices and roles. Stromquist (2006) argues that, while access to leadership positions has allowed women to challenge traditional institutional practices, policies and structures, the pathway for women remains obstructed by institutional structural barriers. The findings show that four school heads experienced some form of resistance from their teachers. The degree of resistance varied from open defiance to subtle non-compliance among teachers, both male and female. School head (PS4) indicated that, at her school, resistance was evident among teachers, especially male teachers. She remarked that "I don't know if Mr Mpofu (pseudonym) was really not feeling well because he did not attend our staff meeting yesterday, indicating that he was ill but was seen playing soccer with the learners at the sports ground". The key finding that emerges from the study is that female heads of schools face multiple challenges in their positions of head

and some of these challenges emanate from the teachers they lead.

While there were limited responses from the focus groups on this issue of structure, one interview participant (SS3) said the following about structural factors that affect women in leadership positions:

We as women we are not courageous to accept and effectively execute big roles like school leadership. Yes some of us are in these positions but we lack the support from our colleagues and even the community has no confidence in us. I have noticed that our members of the community have a negative attitude towards women heads and we are just imposed on them School Development Committees (SDCs) cannot take decisions made by a women leader and thus why in all these schools the chairpersons of all SDCs in the cluster are men and no women as chair. This is an indication that they have no confidence in us as women leaders.

In this study five heads of schools indicated that they experienced feelings of isolation at their workplaces as teachers do not want to socialise with them. Head (PS2) expressed that she was a new head in her school and teachers in her school were avoiding her. "It's like they don't want me in this school." This is an indication that the negative effects of changing the career ladder also include the loss of friends or people to socialise with.

Of importance is that two heads, (PS3 and SS2), both indicated that, while they have more or less good working relationships with their teachers and the community, they are not in good books with their district education officers because of lack of transport and means of communication. They are in areas that have no cell phone connectivity. Head (PS2) remarked that:

My school is in a remote area as you can see, there is no network for cell phones, to catch buses to the district centre is very difficult for me. I cannot walk 10km in the night to catch buses. The bus stop is 10 km away and transport leaves at 4AM. In some cases I hire Scotch Carts to take me to the bus stop but I cannot afford this every month. This school should have a male head. It is really not safe for me as a lady I am even seeking for transfer.

This finding concurred with head (SS2) who indicated that, while she is in harmony with her teachers, the greatest challenge she faces is travelling to district offices for meetings or to collect pay sheets. She had the following to say:

Come month end, I am supposed to go to the district office to collect pay sheets and attend meetings which coincide with the month end for teachers. In their meetings I do not benefit much because of transport challenges and travelling in the night. I have grand children to look after, I love to be with my grandchildren, their parents passed on and I am their mother, leaving them alone for the whole day or week attending a heads meeting or work shop is painful to me. It is better that I am left with two years to retire I will rest.

From these findings it is argued that female heads face multiple challenges emanating from their organisational structures.

Major differences in leadership styles between men and women

A number of participants and focus group discussions pointed out the major differences in leadership styles between men and women leaders. The assumption was perhaps that the leadership styles adopted by women influence the challenges they face in their leadership positions. It was however interesting to note that there is little difference between the leadership styles of successful males and female school heads. White (2012) and Avolio (2010) assert that there is no significant difference between the leadership styles of successful men and women leaders in organisations. This argument was confirmed by one of the focus group discussant who said: "Our former male head behaved like our current female head. I see no big difference in their leadership styles. Even if there are some differences here and there, they are just but minor".

From the analysis of the responses from both categories of participants it is also concluded that sex related differences are present in school leadership styles, but the differences according to our assessment are insignificant.

Responding to the question whether there are differences in leadership styles between men and women, the majority of participants, especially from focus group discussions, identified the following differences:

- Women are good at prioritising and they have multiple skills.
- Women tend to meet deadlines and they deliver on promises.
- Women empathise well with others, they are socially sensitive and they are good listeners.
- Women leaders enhance teamwork. They encourage innovation through collaborative improvement of colleagues.
- Women encourage personal development.

- Women school heads listen, motivate and provide support to their subordinates, yet men do not have a skill of listening.
- Women in school leadership tend to place more emphasis on communication, cooperation, affiliation and nurturing and they have more communal qualities compared to men.
- Female heads on average are more democratic and participative in decision-making.

In their own words, participants from focus groups had the following to say:

-Our female heads are stronger in interpersonal aspects of leadership.

-Female heads are good and competent planners who can effectively manage activities in the school.

-While men express views with confidence and being always visible across the school and making their presence felt, women are good in leading teams, managing performance and they have the ability to communicate clearly.

-Female heads are hardworking and committed.

-While male school heads tend to be more direct and goal oriented, women tend to be relationship oriented and they seek harmony.

-Women heads are more democratic and participative than their male counterparts.

-I would prefer a female head more than a male head because ladies are less likely to accept or pay bribes than men. Female heads are not corrupt

-Women school heads adopt transformational leadership which seeks to increase the interest of members of staff. They motivate staff members and they are proactive

-Female heads are rough and very jealousy.

All these views from the participants of this study are confirmed by the literature which established that there are multiple indicators that women, compared to men, enact their leadership role with a view to produce outcomes that can be described as more compassionate, benevolent and ethical promoting effective school leadership (Avolio, 2010). According to Schiebinger and Gilmartin (2010) women leaders adopt transformational leadership and act as inspirational role models, they foster good human relationships develop the skills of followers and motivate others to go beyond the confines of their job descriptions. In general, women place more emphasis on the social values of benevolence. They emphasise the preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom they are in frequent personal contact (Avolio, (2010). Women leaders combine feminine and masculine leadership behaviour, which is also known as androgynous leadership, more than men (Schiebinger et al., 2010).

From the participants' views and the literature review it can be concluded that women are more powerful school leaders who are capable of providing sustainable organisational improvements and development, despite the multiple challenges they face in these positions.

Effects of women's leadership styles

Responses from the majority of participants revealed that participative, democratic and team work leadership styles were mainly dominant styles of leadership among women heads. These approaches, according to our analysis have the potential to enhance the achievement of goals in schools. One of the focus group discussant (FG4) mentioned that:

Our head has the potential to maximize on the achievement of goals given the prevailing atmosphere in the school and the quality of leadership she provides. Our school is one of the best in the district at "O" Level and "A" Level. The use of democratic and participative leadership styles in this school enables us to contribute ideas that would improve teaching and learning. This is the home of distributed leadership, which makes a significant difference in improving student learning.

This finding is in line with Harris (2008) add who argued that the adoption of distributed leadership in schools can contribute to the achievement of organizational goals. The study established that women school leaders tend to place more emphasis on communication, cooperation affiliation and nurturing. These communal qualities are seen to be crucial for school leadership and to improve learning outcomes. The idea that women school leaders advocate for team work, stability, motivation, recognizing trends and acting on new ideas make them powerful school leaders who have the potential to sustain school improvement. It emerged from the focus group discussions that woman leaders have the potential to motivate their subordinates as a result of the participative decision-making approaches they adopt. Motivation is crucial for teachers to be more effective in their teaching. One of the focus group discussant mentioned that: "Female heads are good at motivating teachers, encouraging them to work hard, improving the quality of their work and also giving them verbal rewards. All this is good for us and we feel recognized in the school." Yet, another teacher from (FG4) remarked that: "In this school the head is more of an incentive based leader, she tends to motivate us with positive rewards based

incentives, every teacher is happy here because of her motivational strategies.”

In contrast to this remark, one of the teachers commented in this regard:

Female heads are very hard to work with they do not appreciate our effort, no rewards for work done well. My soccer team did very well at district competitions and she even did not say well done. She is jealous and rather cruel. I think she is a frustrated woman. I no longer like to work under her.

One of the female teachers from (FG6) furthermore observed:

I have liked our head for providing support and mentoring us at the work place. She provides us with training and developmental programs on new curriculum issues; this is good for us and our learners. She places greater concern to our welfare and the welfare of our families which also tend to motivate us and we respect her.

The above responses are an indication that female school heads have the skill and potential to motivate employees which is crucial for the achievement of school goals. They also allow for inputs into their decision-making. This makes members of staff feel the full ownership of decisions made in the school which also makes it easy to implement the decisions. However, there are different personalities, as there are different leaders in the schools as observed by one of the teachers who mentioned and highlighted a different view all together. According to Agozen (2010) participative styles of leadership adopted by female leaders are correlated to successful achievement in student learning. A feminine style of leadership is often more motivational than a masculine style of leadership (Salim, 2007). It is also argued that, under a feminine leadership, teachers tend to have good working relationships, they assist in bringing about change and they tend to have self-discipline.

Conclusion

The findings from the triangulated data collection through individual face to face interviews and focus group discussions with female heads clearly reflect that almost all categories of participants attributed the challenges faced by women school leaders to structural, social and cultural entrenchments in society and schools in particular. It is fascinating, yet perhaps not surprising, that a profession in which the majority of teachers are women is mostly led by men due to structural, social and cultural challenges that frustrate women in these leadership positions. This is confirmed in a study by Chabaya, Rembe and Wadesango (2009);

There were 246 secondary school heads in Masvingo province but of this figure, only 14 (5.60%) were female heads and 8 (3.25%) were female deputy heads. In the case of primary schools, there were a total of 693 school heads and only 68 (9.81%) were female heads while 56 (8.08%) were female deputy heads (Chabaya, et al, 2009. p. 237).

There are social biases and stereotypes that still exist in most schools and communities and this is working against women, thus undermining Government's Affirmative Action and Employment Equity policies. On the other hand, female heads in this study were virtually absent mothers to their children and families, ultimately going against the social and cultural expectations of women being relegated to particular roles, such as child rearing and performing household chores (Kolb, William & Frolinger, 2010). Despite several strides that have been made on gender equality in response to feminist ideologies, affirmative action and other global initiatives on gender parity, gender masculine leadership is still dominating school organizations, as highlighted by this study.

Findings from our qualitative study are confirmed with those by Al-Hussein (2011) who showed that women in the teaching profession face several challenges in their way to approach the leadership position, such as the negative stereotype of the women in both the men and women minds, limited ambitions among women, and the main cultural and structural barriers. The findings from this study are also consistent with those of Al-Raqeb's (2009) study which illustrated that the most challenges expressed by the study sample were social, cultural and structural, followed by political challenges and finally personal barriers. It can therefore be concluded that, even though women form a large proportion of the teaching staff in Zimbabwe and have all the excellent leadership styles identified in the study, they still cannot hold a proportionate share of the leadership in schools, due to multiple challenges identified in our paper.

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