Women in Educational Leadership:
Conceptualizing Gendered Perceptions in Tanzanian Schools

Ndenisa Mollel[1], Icarbord Tshabangu[2]

[1] University of Arusha, [2] University of Namibia
TANZANIA.

[1] ndenisa1962@gmail.com, [2] icatshabs@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Though evidence suggests that the proportion of women in management is increasing, doubts and prejudice regarding women's leadership skills and ability still exist. The emergence of several initiatives in Tanzania such as the Women Education and Development (WED) organ in the early 1980s, whose main goal was to enhance gender equity in education have given rise to improved numbers of women in higher education and access to resources. However, such progress has not fully translated into future professional work settings, especially in areas such as educational leadership. The study examined existing perceptions on 20 women heads of schools in Tanzania and the effects this may have on their leadership. Twenty schools led by female principals were identified through purposive sampling and 6 teachers per school also participated. Two set of semi-structured questionnaire were administered, one targeting school principals and the other was for teachers. The evidence suggests that women leadership in schools faced opposition from paternalistic cultures as leadership was still seen in masculine terms. Perceptions still abound that women lack leadership skills. The study advanced a view that the valuing of diversity of leadership particularly gender inclusivity, was critical in educational organizations if a nation hoped to be successful in its developmental vision and goals.

Keywords: Women, leadership, education, school principals, Tanzania

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history there have been embedded beliefs that characterise leadership as a traditionally masculine activity (Gedney, 1999). However, the rise in feminist ideologies in recent years has weakened such strongholds. Paternalistic ideologies on gender roles particularly among traditionalist and conservative communities such as in Tanzania have produced prejudice toward female leaders. Women are considered as having less leadership abilities than men and their leadership is thus perceived less favorably (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Though evidence suggests that the proportion of women in management is increasing in most parts of the world, doubts about women's leadership skills still exist and some organisations still define and perceive management in masculine terms (Brenner et al., 1989; Schein & Mueller, 1992). This study moved to explore existing perceptions on female principals in Tanzanian schools with a view to establish embedded conceptions on women leadership. The paper examined perceptions of women leaders; their subordinates thus arrived at cultural perceptions and organisational perceptions in schools.

BACKGROUND

In the early 1980s Tanzania's professional women gathered to form a special organ called Women Education and Development (WED), whose main goal was to enhance gender equity in education (Tanzania Gender Networking Programme TGNP, 1993). It was noted that girls often entered school burdened by disadvantages linked to poverty and gender inequality leading to low educational achievement for women, thus condemning them to an inferior

cultural status. Since then, the levels of girl-child enrolment across most mainstream sectors of education have reflected improvement in terms of equity and access (Tshabangu & Msafiri, 2013). However, for most women this has not fully translated to levels of management and leadership. Within the wider Tanzanian culture and Africa in general, people tend to perceive men as being competent, skilful, aggressive and able to get things done; and thus ascribe leadership to men, while women are observed as warm, expressive, quiet, gentle and lacking confidence (UNICEF, 1990; Tanye, 2008). Resultantly, most Tanzanian women are largely considered as befitting the role of housewives, meant to take charge of domestic duties hence given less opportunities to exercise leadership skills in the work place. Since gender equality initiatives have helped women to gain work experience and the education necessary to qualify for leadership positions, this study posits a need to confront existing gender stereotypes and perceptions on organisational leadership so as to re-establish and expand the notion of what constitutes effective leadership as it relates to diversification and role expectations. Since schools provide a fertile training ground for society's future leaders, as such school leadership practices should be reflective, responsive and sensitive to that challenge. This may entail advocating for the valuing of diversity of leadership styles (Rosener, 1990), a feature that may support and nurture women leadership in Tanzania schools.

LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATION

Leadership has long been seen as a key factor in school effectiveness and much interest in educational leadership has increased over the last two decades. This has been due to a number of factors, often related to political demands placed on the education systems. The growth of school-based governance in many countries over the past two decades has meant more influence for the school and therefore a greater role for the school principals, as powers and responsibilities have gradually been devolved from local or national levels to the school (Sallis, 1996; Cloke & Goldsmith, 2002; Bush, Bell & Middlewood, 2009). This has inevitably led to a growth in the importance of the school principal's individual role as leader and therefore a greater interest in leadership as a key factor in school effectiveness and improvement (Harris, 2008).

A growing interest has emerged in most governments in transforming the public sector by learning from the business world due to the wider perception that leadership is one of the key elements that made private sector companies more effective and largely successful than the public sector (Murphy et al., 2006). As a result, studies in educational leadership have blossomed and overshadowed educational management and administration in a bid to engender the notion and power of 'influence' embedded in leadership and how this is critical for improved practices in schools (Bush, Bell & Middlewood, 2009).

LEADERSHIP AND WOMEN

Leadership has generally been associated with men and male traits of behaviour, and as a consequence the perception of a leader is dominated by male stereotypes (Klenke, 1996). Broadbringe (2007) advanced a view that there is a gender difference in leadership and that women bring different qualities to leadership and management positions, which help organizations maintain a competitive advantage. Rosener's (1990) study of female and male executives with similar backgrounds concluded that women tended to manage in different ways than men. The study found that female executives were more interested in transforming people's self-interest into organizational goals by encouraging feelings of individual self-worth, active participation, and sharing of power and information. The qualities stated above

are correlated to successful achievements in students' leaning, which may explain the success of most women leaders in educational organizations (Agezo, 2010).

A feminine style of leadership is often motivational than the masculine style of leadership which tends to emphasize individualism, duty and rules (Shakeshaft, 1998). Similarly, Ngcobo (1996) reported that teachers tended to accept female leaders as school principals because they had good relations with staff, were efficient organizers, self-disciplined and had the ability to bring about positive change often democratically. Furthermore, Lad (2000) noted that female principals were better than males in the area of communicating school goals, supervision and evaluation of instruction, coordinating curriculum, maintaining high visibility, promoting professional development and providing incentives for learning.

THE GENDERD PERCEPTIVE ARGUEMENT

Gender and Sex

In leadership research, gender has been distinguished from sex. The former is viewed as a collection of qualities labelled male or female that is, cultural constructs, while the latter comprises of attributes that are the result of biological characteristics. Male gender qualities are often characterised as aggressive, independent, objective, logical, rational, analytical, decisive, confident, assertive, ambitious, opportunistic and impersonal. These are distinguished from female gender qualities described as emotional, sensitive, expressive, cooperative, intuitive, warm, tactful, receptive to ideas, talkative, gentle, tactful, empathetic and submissive (Park, 1996; Osland et al, 1998). The notion of male and female gender qualities facilitates the argument that male gender qualities are oriented towards more impersonal, task-oriented or transactional approach to leadership, while female gender qualities tends towards more nurturing, relationship-oriented style of leadership that underlies the transformational leadership approach.

Gendered arguments

The assertion that gender influences leadership approaches is by no means a unanimous one. As noted above, Rosener (1990), in a survey of male and female executive with similar age, jobs and education, found that women tended to be more transformational in their leadership style than men. Using their version of transformational leadership model, Kouzes & Posner (1990), found that female leaders were more likely than male leaders to practice 'modeling the way' and 'encouraging the heart' thus identifying women as more likely to be sensitive to subordinates' needs. A cross-cultural study by Gibson (1995) involving Norway, Sweden, Australia and the USA, found that male leaders were more likely to emphasize goal-setting than female leaders while female leaders were more likely to focus on facilitating interaction than male leaders. These trends and character traits among women leaders were also noted in the Malaysian public sector leadership survey (Salim, 2007).

On the other hand there are those who have argued that leadership is not necessarily influenced by gender but by personality traits (Powell & Butterfield, 1989; Ronk, 1993). Male and female leaders in organisations tended to exhibit similar amounts of task-oriented and people-oriented leadership behaviours (Powell, 1990). Kolb (1999) asserted that two decades of research indicated few, if any leadership differences in the leadership behaviours of male and female leaders noting that leadership styles have to do with how a person relates to people, tasks and challenges. A person's style is usually a very personal and distinctive feature of his or her personality and character. A style may be democratic, centralized, decentralized, emphatic, detached, extroverted, introverted, assertive, passive, engaged or remote. These different styles may work well in different situations and there is often a proper fit between the needs of an organization and the appropriate leadership style.

Although it is a general belief that women have a different leadership style to men, Blackmore (1999) reasoned that it may be problematic to lump all women together and treat them as if they were a homogenous group without considering differences, though it may not be denied that women have certain leadership qualities that are different from men, such as the propensity to care and nurture. Kaputa (2009) recognized women leaders as more like mentors or coaches favouring collaboration, involving colleagues in making decision; nurturing various members of the team; often highly intuitive and more service oriented in dealing with clients than male leaders. There is a substantial body of opinion which holds that the leadership of modern organizations needs to be distributed, non-coercive, based on team work, and adept at building relationships (Spillane & Diamond, 2007; Harris, 2008; Bush, Bell & Middlewood, 2009), which, according to Agezo (2010), is the very style of leadership naturally employed by most women. Since women leaders tend to apply a transformational leadership style, such may probably render them more suitable leaders in academic environments where there is often emphasis on team working and collaboration (Dopson & MacHay, 1996)

THE NOTION OF PERCEPTION

One of the factors that underlie a particular form of sex-based discrimination involves the concept of perception. In organizational behaviour theory, perception is defined as the way in which people observe, view, and interpret others and events around them to create a sense of order for their environment (Robak, Ward & Ostolaza, 2005). Perception greatly affects the attitudes employees have of other workers, their leaders and themselves, as well as the decisions they make within an organization. Perceptions are often seen as affecting or affected by reality and are therefore seen in most cases as inextricably interlinked with reality.

Perception in the work-place

A female employee's perceptions, for example, may be influenced by the extent to which she identifies with a female social identity, and ultimately her perceptions of other women. Her established identity may in turn influence her perceptions about a female leader, such as perceived competency, inter-personality, hostility and communality and her level of satisfaction working under a female leader. These perceptive behaviours may potentially affect the future success of female subordinates in an organization. Where there is gender rarity, a female is more likely to identify less with the female identity because of her male-dominated surroundings. Such distancing may cause the few females more likely to perceive a female leader negatively. However, women in situations of gender equality would largely self-identify with the female identity, thereby reducing negative perceptions towards a woman leader (Heilman, 2001).

METHODOLOGY

The study was located within an interpretive paradigm, using qualitative methods, since the aim was to explore perceptions and meanings on women leadership and their associated effects upon women leaders. The Qualitative approach seemed suitable for a deeper understanding of phenomena (Parahoo, 1997; Grinnell, 1993). The research was conducted in Northern Tanzania and purposively sampled twenty high schools led by female principals. Two set of semi-structured questionnaire were administered, one targeting school principals and the other, six teachers per school for triangulation purposes. The data collected from the respondents helped to establish understanding on four main categories, that is, women leaders' self-perceptions; cultural perceptions; male perceptions and organisational

perceptions prevailing in their schools and the effect these perceptions have on women leadership of schools.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to examine existing perceptions on women heads of schools in Tanzania and the effect this could have on their leadership, particularly the impact on educational practices and personal career. The study therefore set out to determine the perceptions of women heads of schools on self, cultural perception in society and organisational perceptions inherent in their schools and or within the wider education system of governance.

FINDINGS

Age and marriage

Out of the twenty school principals, seven were between the ages of 40 – 45, another seven between the ages of 46 – 55 and the remaining four were aged between 56 – 60 years. Findings on marital status revealed that seventeen were married representing 85% while two were single and one widowed. It was noted that there were no young women in senior leadership since all respondents were forty years old and above, which affirms a view that women in child bearing age are often discriminated against in senior leadership positions in favour of their male counterparts (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Tsoka & Mathipa, 2001). It was noted that when most women entered senior leadership they happen to have been already married and have an established family coupled with substantial personal and work related experience and are thus likely to be respected in a leadership position. Results therefore show that most women start to practice senior leadership much later in their employment career.

Confidence

The perception that women leaders lacked confidence and focus, ranked the least averaging 20% from all participants. This may mean that most women principals who are afforded the opportunity to lead are fairly comfortable in senior leadership roles since most of them, in view of their age and experience, are mature and may have 'seen it all' hence the confidence. Despite such a positive result, 60% of all respondents concur that school communities generally perceive women as less able to lead, compared to men and that they lack knowledge in leadership. Explanations for this phenomenon are varying with assumptions that women lacked educational qualifications and work experience (Eagly & Carli, 2003). However, this biased view of women leaders is in tandem with Powell, Butterfield & Bartol, (2008)'s observation that in some organisations a male leader is evaluated more favorably even though he may have identical behaviours exhibited by a female leader. For example some female principals commented that at times when they exhibited confidence and strong leadership, they were perceived as aggressive and in some cases authoritarian.

Education and Experience

The study found that ten respondents were Bachelor's degree holders, which accounted for 50% while nine were Diploma holders and only one had a Master's degree qualification. In terms of work experience, six principals, equaling 30% had work experience as a school principal of between eleven to fifteen years, having started in their forties. Four principals, which is 20%, had work experience of between six to ten years, while eight of them, which is (40%) had work experience of between one to five years as heads of schools. Only two had sixteen to nineteen years' experience. As noted earlier, we reiterate the point that due to prevailing unfavorable perceptions, most women start senior leadership much later in their career, which means that few of them if any may have a lengthy leadership experience of

over twenty years before retirement. Nevertheless, the educational qualifications and the experience possessed by most women principals showed that they merited the leadership positions they occupied and dispels the notion that women leaders lack education and experience.

Self-perception of women principals

Of the twenty principals, nineteen, equaling 95% agreed that at times their negative self-perception, oftentimes due to societal expectations, had adverse effect on their leadership. As noted earlier, self-perceptions are critical as to how a leader will be perceived in their position. These women leaders were found to be conscious of this phenomenon and tended to avoid negative self-perceptions as these often reinforced gender prejudices, biases and negative stereotypes thus impacting on their leadership. Out of the 20 principals 75% were found to be afraid to voice their opinions and 80% were concerned about how others perceived their leadership. This finding is consistent with Amondi (2011) who observed that women tended to have fear of failure and tended to avoid criticism. However, all the women, except one were found to have confidence working with men and leading them and that their internal evaluative processes appreciated their leadership.

Cultural perceptions

All the respondents including teachers concurred that cultural perception on women heads of schools affected their leadership. Most of the participants, about 70% noted that women are expected to be submissive to men and that based on cultural traditions, it is still perceived as taboo for a woman to be a leader, especially over men. Despite global and local efforts to improve the status of women in Tanzania, cultural perceptions still encourage women to sacrifice their career for the family, since the men are expected to be bread-winners (Macionis & Gerber, 2010). Over 80% of participants concurred that the wider cultural perceptions position the women as dependents on men and that a woman's career should be subservient to her husband and family. This affirms theoretical assertions that in traditionally conservative societies such as in most parts of Africa (Tanye, 2008; Agezo, 2010; Amondi, 2011), women continue to encounter paternalistic cultural obstacles in their quest to advance into senior positions of leadership. In most African cultures, it is taboo for a woman to lead a society, thus, each sex- group is taught and prepared separately for its future roles specifically designed for that purpose (Tsoka & Mathipa, 2001; Tyrell & Jurgens, 1983). As a consequence women are expected to submit to men in general, while men perceive themselves as heads of their families and unquestioned leaders of their societies.

Male perceptions

Male respondents perceived women to be good leaders if they exercised less power in their leadership. Principals indicated that male's perceptions of them affected their leadership. The notion of aggressive female principals was perceived highly negatively by men compared to women subordinates. Such male perceptions tended to cow women leaders in discharging some of their duties effectively thereby fulfilling a stereotype that they are poor leaders. Most male teacher-participants still perceived women as generally lacking good leadership skills and that men are seen as more qualified to be leaders. This is despite the fact that most women are educated and some have demonstrated that they can be effective school leaders. This reinforces Hopfl & Matilal (2007)'s assertions establishing that in societies heavily laden with paternalistic ideologies, women are perceived to lack order, logic, direction and rationality. Such negative perceptions of male subordinates towards women leaders tended to unsettle women leaders and at times inhibit the fulfilment of their leadership potential and career progression.

Organizational perceptions

The organisational perceptions focused on cultural practices in relation to gender within schools. Just over 70% of all the respondents viewed the schools and their associated parent organisations such as the Ministry of Education as perceiving men and women to have different career paths. This has led to fewer women in line management jobs. These results concur with observations made by Tsoka & Mathipa (2001) that women are mainly perceived as having lesser career paths than men hence they are usually treated negatively when it comes to promotions, especially to positions of senior leadership, coupled with the notion that they are not task oriented. Though the findings show some wider acceptance of women in middle leadership positions such as heads of departments, higher positions such as school principal remain a challenge. Indications are that organizational perceptions on women, probably feeding from paternalistic societal norms and cultures, remain largely uncharitable and biased against women leaders and manifest differently in different cultures (Weyer, 2007).

CONCLUSION

This study has discussed broadly the challenges faced by women educational leaders in Tanzanian schools and has affirmed a view that despite several strides that have been made on gender equality due to feminist ideologies, affirmative actions and global initiatives on gender parity, there are still embedded gender biases and stereotypes that perceive leadership as a masculine activity. The findings of this study have shown that women leaders are continually affected and in some ways inhibited in their leadership potential by negative male perceptions; cultural perceptions; organisational perceptions and sometimes by their negative self-perceptions. Oftentimes their potential as leaders becomes gravely affected thus further reinforce the stereotypes. The study thus posited a view that because women tend to be nurturing, democratic, caring and communicative, they offer a diverse leadership style from men. Such a transformational approach to leadership (Rosener, 1990; Sallis, 1996) may be critical in educational environments such as schools where processes and practices desiring socialization and team work are seen as pivotal.

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