

# **SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AND GENDER IN AFRICA: A SYSTEMATIC OVERVIEW**

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to report the findings of a systematic review of school leadership and gender in Africa, and to identify gaps in the literature, to prompt and encourage further research. The literature search focused on school leadership and gender, linked to all 54 African countries. The review focused on articles in non-predatory journals<sup>1</sup>, plus university theses. The analysis was conducted by country, and then by three central themes, accession to principalship, leadership enactment, and leadership styles.

The review provides a compelling picture of school leadership and gender in Africa, with three main findings. First, there is limited knowledge production on this important topic, with no sources identified in most African countries. Second, organisational, social and personal factors combine to inhibit women's accession to school leadership. Third, African women principals are shown to be more collegial and collaborative than men, with some evidence that they may be more effective school leaders.

The article's conclusion draws out three main implications. First, the findings indicate a strong need for ministries of education to review their recruitment and selection policies to address barriers to women's accession as school principals. Second, they show deeply embedded social attitudes that women should be focused on domestic and family responsibilities, rather than school leadership. This calls for community education programmes to address family and social attitudes. Third, while the article presents a significant picture of the extent and nature of women principals' leadership accession and enactment across the continent, further research is recommended to address knowledge gaps, especially in those African countries where there is no knowledge production on school leadership and gender.

## **Keywords**

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<sup>1</sup> Sources were checked against online lists of predatory journals

Africa, gender, management, principals, school leadership

## **Introduction**

It is increasingly recognized that effective leadership is critical for successful schooling (Leithwood et al, 2006). ‘Leadership has very significant effects on the quality of school organization and on pupil learning’ (ibid: 5). However, international evidence shows that women are under-represented in school leadership. While teaching is often a feminized profession, men dominate as school principals especially in secondary schools. This paper explores the reasons for the paucity of women principals. Drawing on the findings from a systematic review of academic and grey literature on school leadership and gender in Africa, this paper addresses the enablers and barriers that impact on the accession of women to leadership. It also examines the leadership practices of African women principals, including their leadership styles and the challenges they face when enacting leadership. The paper provides data relevant to two United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, SDG4 on quality education, and SDG5 on gender equality.

There are a few systematic reviews of school leadership in Africa, for example Bush and Glover (2016a, 2016b), and Hallinger (2018), but these are not specific to gender. There is only limited literature on school leadership and gender in Africa, and this article offers what is believed to be the first systematic continent-wide overview of this important topic. This paper first provides a review of international literature to identify the main global issues on this topic. The methods and search parameters are then discussed, followed by analysis of the 31 sources that focus specifically on gender and school leadership in Africa.

## **Literature Review**

There is a significant body of literature on gender and school leadership relating to many countries, described by Shapira et al (2011) as a ‘central research topic’. A broad distinction can be made between accession, enablers and barriers for women seeking leadership positions, and enactment, women’s experience following accession to the principalship.

### Accession to leadership

The international literature has several sources discussing and explaining why women are under-represented as principals, even though teaching is largely a female profession. Coleman (2012) links this disparity to stereotypes, including those that link women to domestic and supportive roles. Murakami and Tornsen (2017) confirm that the gender distribution of women in school leadership is uneven in many countries. They attribute this to the ‘perpetuation of biases’ (ibid: 820) within education systems, for example in Sweden and the United States. Martinez et al (2021) report the OECD (2016) study which shows that, even in secondary schools, women comprise 67% of the teaching population but hold only 45% of principal positions. These authors analyse this disparity through supply and demand factors. The demand side is attributed to bias and discrimination in employers’ practices, with ‘double standards’ and a ‘higher bar’ for the promotion of women. On the supply side, potential lower self-efficacy means that women may ‘self-exclude from leadership positions’, limiting the pool of potential principals.

Shapira et al (2011: 26) report on the experience of Arab women principals in Israel, an ‘ethnic minority that suffers from discrimination’. These authors add that ‘they belong to a society with a conservative culture, which suppresses women’ (ibid). They conclude that, ‘even when a woman has superior achievements to a man in all the relevant areas, men are preferred for

management (ibid: 39). Similarly, Arar (2019) presents research on women leaders in three Arab societies, in Israel, the Palestine Authority territories, and Jordan. He concludes that Arab women's path to management positions is an especially long and tortuous journey, compared to those in other jurisdictions, since they face especially rigid resistant sociocultural structures'.

Smith's (2017) analysis of the life histories of 40 UK teachers leads her to stress the importance of agency in women's career trajectories. While there was evidence that they had encountered a range of barriers and constraints, women are not 'passive dupes' (ibid: 22), whose lives are totally shaped by the forces of discrimination and socialization. In most cases, career decisions were linked to self-perceptions about personal agency. Similarly, while Guihen's (2019) study of 12 English women deputy heads notes three barriers to leadership accession, culture, stereotypes, and internal barriers, women also have 'agentic capabilities' (ibid: 550), meaning that they navigate these challenges in different ways. A study of motives for accession in Spain (Garcia-Rodriguez et al, 2020) shows that women place a lower value on extrinsic motivation than men and are more likely to be relationship-oriented.

While gender is the focus of this review, it is important to note the impact of intersectionality where accession for women may be inhibited by two or more factors. Showunmi et al's (2016) study of white, black, Asian, and minority ethnic women leaders in the UK shows that leadership identities are forged by race, ethnicity, religion and social class, as well as gender. Compared to white women, minority ethnic groups described more current and pervasive barriers to enacting their leadership identities. Moorosi et al (2018) draw on data from three countries, including South Africa, and stress the significance of intersectionality, as discuss later. Armstrong and Mitchell (2017) also refer to the importance of intersectionality, notably in respect of race and gender in Canada. They conclude that:

‘Educational administration continues to be dominated by strongly patriarchal and racialized practices that contain and circumscribe difference. Women of colour are placed at the margins of administration and engage in a paradoxical process of shifting to fit in order to achieve their personal and professional goals’ (Armstrong and Mitchell, 2017: 839).

### Leadership enactment

The challenges inhibiting accession to the principalship remain significant even after they are appointed and begin to enact leadership. For example, women usually take on the bulk of family and domestic responsibilities, while enacting the demanding responsibilities associated with headship, and ‘this social convention appears to take its toll on female leaders’ (Coleman, 2012: 601). Jones (2017: 921) also discusses the expectation that women should take primary responsibility for the home, manifest in ‘high levels of commitment demonstrated by women within both domestic and professional lives’. This juggling comes at a ‘significant cost’, leading to the notion of ‘balanced leadership . . . [where] women who manage their home responsibilities effectively will perform better in their professional lives’ (ibid).

While social and cultural characteristics exist, a separate strand of research relates to evidence that women lead more effectively than men. For example, Weinstein et al’s (2021) study in Chile indicates that women principals are perceived more favourably than men by teachers in their schools. In nine out of 14 leadership practices, women were rated more highly than men. Shaked et al’s (2020) meta-analysis shows that women are more active instructional leaders

than men. The authors attribute this to women having greater instructional expertise and paying more attention to relationships.

Larusdottir (2007) stresses the importance of values, arguing that, in Iceland, these are predominantly task oriented rather than people oriented. She adds that this may not work to the advantage of women who are more likely than men to stress collaboration, power sharing, caring, and teaching and learning. Similarly, Coleman's (1996) study of five UK women secondary school heads indicates that they adopt collaborative and participative styles, in contrast to the predominant task-based approach of their male counterparts. 'One very powerful reason why the styles of the male secondary head are extant is . . . that overwhelming numbers of secondary heads are in fact male. This makes it particularly difficult for women to escape the stereotype'. (ibid: 172).

Moorosi et al (2018) stress that gender is not the only factor influencing leadership accession and enactment. They draw on intersectionality theory to discuss constructions of successful leadership by three Black women school principals in three different contexts: England, South Africa and the United States. The shortage of literature on Black women in educational leadership leaves them on the periphery even in contexts where they are in the majority, as in South Africa. The authors' analysis indicates that Black women leaders' constructions of success are shaped by overcoming barriers of their own racialized and gendered histories to being in a position where they can lead in providing education for their Black communities, where they are able to inspire a younger generation of women and to practice leadership that is inclusive, fair and socially just.

## **Method**

The authors conducted a systematic review of the academic and official (grey) literature on school leadership in Africa. The review was organized thematically, focused on pre-

determined and emergent topics, including school leadership and gender, the focus of this article. The research questions relate to whether and how women are inhibited from accessing school leadership positions and how they lead and manage schools following accession to the principalship.

The sources reviewed for this paper emerged from the Mendeley search app, and Google Scholar, supplemented by the first author's University library sources, and the African Educational Research database. African sources were considered from all non-predatory publishers, including post-graduate theses. The first key word 'trunk' searches were based on each African country, linked to 'school leadership' and, then more specifically, to school leadership and gender. Inclusion criteria were that sources should focus on gender and school leadership in one or more African countries. Time limits were not applied to the search, but all sources were published between 2005 and 2022. This process identified the 31 articles on gendered school leadership in Africa discussed in this article.

## **Results**

The pattern of knowledge production on school leadership and gender in Africa is mixed, with no knowledge production identified in 44 countries, showing that this theme is under-researched. The ten countries featured in the review are shown in table 1, with South Africa, Zimbabwe and Ghana being the main centres of research on gender and school leadership in Africa.

COUNTRY	Leadership Accession	Leadership Enactment	Leadership Styles	Total
South Africa	2	6	0	8
Zimbabwe	2	4	1	7
Ghana	0	5	0	5
Kenya	1	1	1	3
Nigeria	1	0	2	3
Benin	1	0	0	1
Ethiopia	1	0	0	1
Lesotho	1	0	0	1
Tanzania	1	0	0	1
Uganda	1	0	0	1
<i>Total</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>31</i>

*Table 1: Knowledge production on school leadership and gender in Africa*

Table 1 shows that the review identified 31 sources focused on gendered school leadership in Africa, from ten countries. South Africa (8), Zimbabwe (7) and Ghana (5) have the most knowledge production, while there are three papers focused on both Kenya, and Nigeria. There are only single sources in five of the ten countries. There is a clear need for more research on this topic in Africa. The data are analysed thematically, focusing on leadership accession, leadership enactment, and leadership styles.

#### Leadership accession

Several papers from different countries report on the under-representation of women in leadership positions, including Dagnew et al (2020), in Ethiopia, Mbpera (2015), in Tanzania, Sperandio and Kagoda (2010), in Uganda, Komiti and Moorosi (2020), in Lesotho, and



(Aladejana and Aladanje, 2005), in Nigeria. These insights suggest that this may be a continent-wide problem but the explanations for under-representation include national and local contextual differences as well as some similarities.

Three papers offer a three-level analysis of factors inhibiting leadership accession for women. Dagneu et al's (2020) analysis of the challenges affecting women's participation in educational leadership is based on data from 106 teachers and 24 school leaders in Ethiopian primary schools. These authors identify challenges at the self-image, organizational, and societal levels, each inhibiting qualified women from becoming school leaders. At the self-image level, challenges such as women still acknowledging the world as masculine, women's fear of balancing professional work and family responsibility, lack of mentors and role models, reluctance of women to hold positions of power, lack of awareness and knowledge of organisational culture, are deterring women from taking leadership positions. In addition, cultural challenges, such as cultural and religious sentiment that women are inferior to men, male prejudice reflecting stereotypes of women as less appropriate to be leaders, girls and boys being socialised into different roles, and societal expectations, are major hindrances to women's participation in school leadership.

In South Africa, Moorosi (2010) identifies personal, organisational and social obstacles to leadership accession. She reports female principals' experiences of their career route to the principalship of secondary schools in South Africa. Her framework suggests that women experience more obstacles than men on their career route. Personal, organizational, and social factors manifest in social practices within and outside schools. Central to these experiences is the underlying male norm of who is more appropriate for secondary school principalship.

Mbpera's (2015) study of female under-representation in senior leadership positions in community secondary schools in rural Tanzania, involving 259 participants at twenty schools in one rural district, also indicates three levels of challenge for potential women principals. At the individual level, family responsibilities, and rejecting the post due to poor social services in rural areas, deter women from taking leadership posts. At the organisational level, the lack of transparent procedures for recommending, recruiting, and appointing heads also contributes to poorer access for women. At the societal level, negative perceptions and stereotypes of female leaders, conservative expectations that women should be in the private domain, rather than in professional and public roles, and deep-seated beliefs in some rural areas pertaining to issues such as witchcraft, at times resulted in physical risk and exploitation of female leaders. These proved to be strong barriers to leadership succession and resulted in on-going, significant challenges for incumbent female leaders.

Negative attitudes from a range of stakeholders inhibit women's leadership accession in several African contexts. In South Africa, Ndebele (2018) investigated the challenges faced by ten female school principals in one rural district. She discusses 'negative attitudes' from parents and teachers, adding that male dominance of school leadership is part of the 'entrenched culture'. The findings show that female school principals were perceived as incompetent by male and female colleagues, because of an entrenched culture of male dominance. As well as negative attitudes from parents and educators, women principals feel undermined because of their gender, and often lack confidence. Female principals indicate that male dominance is an entrenched culture among male staff members in general and, notably, by male School Management Team (SMT) members.

Mberia (2017) examined stakeholders' attitudes that impede women teachers' ascension to leadership positions in mixed public secondary schools in Kenya. She gathered data from

women classroom teachers, heads of departments, school principals, education officers, education trade unionists, parents and teachers' association officials, and School Board of Management officials, through questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups. The study established that education stakeholders have a general negative attitude towards women's leadership in schools, arising from social and cultural factors.

Mapolisa et al (2015) explore dilemmas faced by female primary school leaders in Harare, Zimbabwe. The study focused on five primary schools, with participants comprising the five female heads, one male deputy head, and five female teachers-in-charge<sup>2</sup> (TICs). First, married female school leaders face the dilemma of choosing between marriage and their leadership career. Second, the research participants face negative societal attitudes towards them. Thirdly, female school leaders lack support from fellow subordinates. Female school heads also feel that they need to work very hard, to prove that they are worthy to occupy those posts, so that male bosses will change their 'unspoken' corporate cultures of discrimination against them.

Chabaya et al (2009) also investigate the barriers to women's advancement to headship in Zimbabwean primary schools, and the causes of persistent under-representation of women. Data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions with 13 experienced women teachers. Most were well qualified for promotion to school headship positions, and many either had a university degree or were pursuing degree studies. They also have extensive experience, but most had not applied for headship. Gender stereotypes are one of the major causes of persistent under-representation of women in primary school headship. These are manifest in low self-esteem, lack of confidence, women's perception that their role in the family overrides all other roles, and lack of support from the home and the workplace.

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<sup>2</sup> Teachers-in-charge lead some small rural schools that do not have principals.

Sperandio and Kagoda (2010) acknowledge that the under-representation of women leaders in secondary schools is a problem common to many developing countries, raising issues of social justice and sustainable development, examining this issue in respect of Ugandan secondary schools. Their data are based on a survey of 62 female secondary school teachers from six coeducational schools, in different areas of Uganda. The paper reveals that most female teachers aspire to school leadership, but few had positioned themselves to do well in the competitive application process. Many women think that the process is corrupt, and they also do not expect to receive support from their current school administrator.

Aledejana and Aladanje (2005) identify several problems for women leaders in South-West Nigeria. Their study is based on extensive survey data from 20 tertiary institutions, 122 secondary and 120 primary schools. One questionnaire was administered to 615 students, parents and alumni of these institutions and another to 48 women heads of institutions and departments. The authors show male domination of leadership in the tertiary institutions. About half of the secondary schools are headed by women while primary schools have more female heads than males.

In Benin, Hygin and Ayena (2021) report that women feel confined to the role of stay-at-home-mother. Despite this expectation, women have competence that can be maximized for the effectiveness of educational reform policies. Bold actions have been carried out by the public authorities since the 1990s with the creation of schools or boarding schools for young girls all over the country, and free public schooling, but these efforts have been unsuccessful. For example, the outcomes are not visible in an increase in the effective schooling rates of young girls or in the pursuit of studies at a higher level. Women are confined to the role of stay-at-

home mother, which implies her increased responsibility in the management of the household and particularly in the education of children.

Komiti and Moorosi (2020) explore how women principals in Lesotho construct career development experiences by looking specifically into how they choose careers in teaching, how these careers transition from teaching to principalship, and what career advancement opportunities exist in a particular context. They conducted in-depth interviews with eight women principals on their personal and professional lives. The findings reveal that family played a significant role in influencing women's teaching career choices, while transitions from teaching to principalship were influenced by levels of readiness and desire to implement change and to improve student outcomes. They note the strong impact of patriarchy on women's career development:

‘Our explanation of why women in Lesotho are still not able to transform the educational leadership landscape, despite their educational advantage over men in higher levels of literacy, higher qualifications, and the feminised teaching profession, we blame the patriarchal ideology that views men as the official holders of authority. Despite the advantages listed above, women are not empowered to dismantle the patriarchy and begin to change the landscape of educational leadership . . . Patriarchal thinking that values masculine superiority constrains women's career advancement, despite the presence of policies on gender equality and the agency of individual women . . . we note a strong interplay of personal agency, culture, and economic conditions that shape career choices, career transitions, and overall experiences, in the career development of women principals’ (Komiti and Moorosi, 2020: 112).

### Leadership enactment

Despite the barriers inhibiting women's accession to leadership, and their evident under-representation, some African women do become school principals and begin to enact their new roles. The literature examining leadership practice on the continent focus on three main dimensions, the ongoing challenges facing women leaders, their leadership practice, and leadership styles and approaches.

### *Challenges*

Shava et al's (2019) comment that cultural, structural, economic, and social barriers continue in Zimbabwe, even after women become principals, is echoed by several African researchers. Their study involved interviews with six female heads, three primary and three secondary, while focus group discussions were held with teachers from the same schools. The authors show that social biases and stereotypes still exist in most schools and communities, thus undermining Government's Affirmative Action and Employment Equity policies. Also, female heads in this study were virtually absent mothers to their children and families, because of their professional responsibilities, contradicting the social and cultural expectations of women, such as child rearing and performing household chores. Despite several strides being made on gender equality in response to feminist ideologies, affirmative action and other global initiatives on gender parity, masculine leadership is still dominating schools in Zimbabwe.

Similarly, Hockett (2021) explores the leadership challenges facing five Kenyan women principals. These women were identified by their peers as successful in their roles as principals of comprehensive girls' boarding schools in western Kenya. However, they experienced systemic stereotypes due to ongoing patriarchal practices and long-held cultural expectations and norms. The data were collected from individual interviews with the five women principals.

A pervasive finding relates to the ‘double standards’, and inconsistencies of expectations, for male and female leaders in how they lead the schools. The author comments that these principals are *damned if they do, and damned if they don’t*, in respect of what is accepted behaviour for what the leaders do, and societal expectations for what they should do. As one of the participants explained, the male leaders often meet at night to discuss issues pertaining to their schools and communities. The women acknowledge that they need to attend these types of meetings, to speak on the issues and to stay current on policies and changes, but they are viewed with contempt by the community and their school if they are out late at night. One primary concern is not only safety but also the perception from the community that ‘she is only out late at night to sleep her way to the top’ (Ibid). Further, the extra time involved in this type of networking continues to stretch her capacity in the dual roles of school leader and family caregiver. The women comment that their male colleagues do not face similar scrutiny or challenges which connects back to male dominance in leadership. These defined roles persist because they are still deeply embedded in the accepted social structures.

Faulkner (2015) conducted longitudinal life history research with two women principals of disadvantaged South African rural schools. She reports on issues of authority and power contestations, and the manifestation of deeply entrenched cultural traditions and patriarchy. These impact on the execution of principalship for women leaders in deeply rural, traditional communities. They navigate work and family responsibilities and, despite the barriers of patriarchy, they demonstrate agency, expressed as self-confidence, self-belief, and a strong sense of purpose. Sinyosi and Potokri (2021) point to the wide-ranging challenges facing ten women principals in rural Limpopo, South Africa, including gender discrimination and societal stereotypes, while Themane et al (2017) report that one Limpopo principal feels that cultural issues interfere with her leadership. Similarly, Diko (2014) comments that conservative and

patriarchal tendencies undermine the attainment of gender equality in the Eastern Cape province.

Similar findings are reported by Zikhali and Perumal (2018) in respect of 12 female primary heads leading in socio-economic disadvantaged schools in Zimbabwe's Masvingo District. Data were generated through individual semi-structured interviews, and observations, revealing the emotional labour that emanates from stress-related cultural and contextual factors. The sources of their emotional stress were related to the plight of children; stereotypical gender expectations; lack of parental cooperation; and unrealistic professional and social expectations. However, despite experiencing anxiety, pain, sorrow, sympathy, frustration, sadness, and concern, the heads were happy about their appointments to leadership positions. The authors suggest the establishment of social networks, through which female heads could share their experiences.

Lumby's (2015) analysis of interview data from 54 women school principals in South Africa identifies five leadership strategies, linked to their identities in relation to gender, ethnicity, and other characteristics. These strategies are transforming the value of low-status identities, asserting a valued identity, negating stigmatised characteristics, denying disadvantage, and accepting women's inferiority. Each may bring benefit to the individual but may also further embed disadvantage, so that women are caught in a web of discrimination. She concludes that the impact of action may not be captured by simplistic cause and effect analysis but appears to be embedding sexism further and leveraging limited gains.

*Leadership practice*



While the earlier discussion indicates continuing challenges for women principals, there is also evidence of successful leadership practice. Amakyi and Ampah-Mensah (2021), and Brion and Ampah-Mensah (2021), report on the experiences of women principals located in Komenda Edina Eguafo Abrem (KEEA) district of the Central Region of Ghana, a patriarchal and traditional society. The findings reveal that the 12 participating women principals navigated cultural norms and beliefs to exercise their own leadership style and pursue their careers in education. These women leaders were also able to gradually change the teachers' and community members' mindsets on women and leadership. There was no formal orientation for any of the respondents when they assumed their new roles. The researchers therefore recommend that the district education offices should organize joint orientation sessions for newly appointed school heads, particularly women school heads and community leaders. Networking was seen to be a great resource for the women principals, so it is recommended that successful leaders be offered the opportunity to share their experiences, become mentors, and share how they overcame cultural barriers.

Smit's (2013) qualitative narrative inquiry focused on the nature of female leadership in a primary school located in a disadvantaged South African community, where most learners lived in squatter camps, 85% of the parents were unemployed, many were refugees from Mozambique and Zimbabwe, many were orphaned, and most had only one meal per day, provided by the school. The principal was researched over a period of three years, using observations and guided conversations. She taught reading classes, gathered food for the hungry learners in her school, established a Non-Profit Organisation, educated parents, disciplined learners, chaired committees, managed the school finances, and initiated school building projects. The findings show that the principal's work was grounded in the complex demands of everyday school activities, while not neglecting to enact curriculum leadership.

Lopez and Rogano (2018) report on the experiences of three Kenyan female secondary school principals. Utilizing a decolonizing education and social justice leadership discursive framework, the tensions and complexities of the principals' leadership practices were explored. The findings support existing research on the perpetuation of colonized approaches to education, tensions in practice regarding the manifestation of social issues in schools, and the need for leadership development grounded in Kenyan knowledge and experiences.

Ovedale et al's (2010) study was designed to investigate teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of women leadership in Mutare District (Zimbabwe) schools. A sample of 100 primary and secondary school teachers were randomly selected from ten schools, to complete a structured questionnaire, with an 'open comment' section. The results showed that the teachers perceived women's leadership as effective. They also indicate that women leaders were confident in the discharge of their duties and that they were conversant with the demands of school headship. Overall, women's leadership was perceived as effective by the teachers, because of their confident and capable exercise of their professional responsibilities (Ovedale et al, 2010).

Agezo and Hope (2011) found that no differences between male and female leadership practices in Ghana. Similarly, teachers in Ghana perceive that women are just as effective as men when enacting instructional leadership (Abonyi et al, 2022). In contrast however, Agezo (2010: 701) shows that the five Ghanaian principals in his study 'were able to excel in their leadership positions by transforming their schools into a place of excellence'.

Moyo and Perumal (2019) highlighted the needs, opportunities, constraints, and resources of disadvantaged schools and how this context influences the leadership practices of Zimbabwean

female primary school principals. Through the lens of an African feminist perspective, the authors established that principals craft strategies to expand the available resources while taking advantage of the opportunities at their disposal to manage constraints and meet the needs, of their schools.

### *Leadership styles*

A related body of literature explores the leadership styles and approaches adopted by women principals in Africa. A synthesis of 25 studies on women in educational leadership and management in Zimbabwe (Moyo et al (2020), identified ‘female ways of leading’ as being characterized as collegial, collaborative and caring. Similarly, Nosike and Oguzor’s (2011) examined the leadership styles of male and female principals in Nigeria. Principals, teachers, and students were all asked to discuss the styles of leadership commonly adopted by male and female principals and the data show that female principals adopt a democratic style of leadership to a greater extent than men. The female principals also involve their staff in decision-making more than their male counterparts. These data confirm Aledejana and Aladanje’s (2005) finding that schools led by women heads in South-West Nigeria are generally considered to be managed better than those led by males.

### **Discussion**

The African literature addresses the same broad themes as the international sources, reaching some similar conclusions but also identifying issues specific to Africa or to individual countries.

## *Accession*

Martinez et al (2021) identify demand and supply factors inhibiting leadership accession for women. The supply of women leaders is inhibited by lower self-efficacy and the higher standards they ‘self impose’, before considering applications for principalship positions. This leads to ‘self-exclusion’. This problem is echoed in Chabaya’s (2009) Zimbabwe study, where women had not attempted to apply for leadership posts, discouraged by gender stereotypes and low self-esteem. These supply factors are also evident in the three-level analysis of under-representation offered in Ethiopia (Dagnev et al, 2020), South Africa (Moorosi, 2010), and Tanzania (Mbpera, 2015). Dagnev et al (2020) refer to self-image issues, Moorosi (2010) discusses ‘personal obstacles’, while Mbpera mentions the more specific factor of family responsibilities. This latter point connects to Komiti and Moorosi’s (2020) finding that patriarchy inhibits leadership accession for women in Lesotho.

Martinez et al’s (2021) demand-side issue is that of ‘double standards’, where women are held to a higher standard than men, in terms of qualifications and experience. This is evident in Kenya, where women are negatively affected by ‘deeply embedded social structures’ (Mberia, 2017). Dagnev et al (2020), Moorosi (2010) and Mbpera (2015) all refer to organizational and societal barriers to leadership accession for women in Ethiopia, South Africa, and Tanzania, formidable obstacles for potential school principals. These barriers are described in forthright terms such as gender stereotypes in Zimbabwe (Chabaya et al, 2009), entrenched culture in South Africa (Ndebele, 2018), patriarchal ideology and practices in Kenya (Hockett, 2021) and in Lesotho (Lomiti and Moorosi, 2020, and corruption in Uganda (Sperandio and Kagoda, 2010). These examples can all be seen as features of gender discrimination (Martinez et al, 2021).

### *Enactment*

Many women succeed in surmounting the challenges discussed above, to become school principals. However, some of the issues remain following accession. While enacting leadership, women continue to experience negative attitudes, stereotypical views, discrimination, and a conservative culture (Shapira et al, 2011, Coleman, 2012). The problem of ongoing stereotypes and bias is also reported in Zimbabwe (Shava et al, 2019) and Kenya (Hockett, 2021). However, women leaders are not necessarily passive in responding to such pressures and many exert agency to lead effectively (Guihen 2019, Smith, 2017), echoed by Faulkner (2015), in respect of South Africa. In Zimbabwe, Moyo and Perumal (2019) report that women principals craft strategies to manage the constraints of disadvantaged school and community contexts. Similarly, women leaders in Ghana navigated cultural norms and beliefs to exercise their own leadership style and gradually change teacher and community mindsets (Amakyi and Ampah-Mensah 2021).

### *Leadership styles*

International research helps to contextualise the African findings. The Chile evidence (Weinstein et al, 2021), for example, that women lead more effectively than men, is reflected in research in Israel (Shapira et al, 2011, where women are seen as better instructional leaders. Coleman (1996), in respect of England, and Larusdottir (2007), reporting on Iceland, both say that women are more collaborative and participative than men. Moyo et al's (2020) research in Zimbabwe also shows that women's leadership is more collegial, collaborative and caring than that of men. Nosike and Oguzor (2011) report that Nigerian women principals exercise more democratic styles, a view supported by Aladejana and Aladanje (2005), who state that Nigerian schools headed by women are 'better managed'. This evidence suggests that women

not only have to be determined and resilient to access leadership but may also offer an approach that is more engaging of staff and stakeholders, to work towards school improvement.

## **Conclusion**

This review of 31 sources provides a compelling picture of school leadership and gender in Africa. Several conclusions arise from the review. First, only ten countries on the continent have knowledge production on gendered school leadership, suggesting that there is limited interest in this important topic in many African countries. This also indicates the need for research on this important topic in those many African countries with no published research on gender and school leadership. Two of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are relevant to this issue. SDG4 stresses quality education but the under-representation of women principals means that leadership talent is being underutilized in many African countries. SDG5 refers to gender quality, noting that 'gender equality is a fundamental human right', adding that 'more women are serving in . . . positions of leadership'. This may be true in other sectors but, as this review demonstrates, is not accurate for women school leaders.

Second, the review provides contextualised data about the barriers facing potential women school leaders in Africa. Several authors mention the personal, organisational and social factors inhibiting female accession to leadership, as well as lack of trust in the recruitment process. Personal factors include low self-efficacy and concern about balancing family and professional responsibilities. Organisational considerations include the nature of the selection process and the 'double standards' applied to women and men. Social issues connect to cultural expectations about gendered roles, including the view that women's main responsibilities

should relate to the home, not to professional work, and that men are better suited to leadership. Cultural change is slow and difficult, so such attitudes may endure for some time.

Third, the review provides answers to the key questions addressed in this article, whether and how women are inhibited from accessing school leadership positions and how they lead and manage schools following accession to the principalship. The review shows that women are more likely than men to be effective instructional leaders, and more likely to be collaborative, caring, and collegial leaders, features of distributed and transformational leadership. Some sources also indicate that women are better leaders than men, raising questions about why this may be true. One plausible reason is that women principals have overcome so many structural and cultural barriers, arising in part from distorted demand factors (Martinez et al, 2021), that only the most talented and determined succeed in accessing the principalship.

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