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How do Cultural Factors Contribute towards Underrepresentation of Women Teachers in School Leadership in Primary Schools

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Abstract: The study explored cultural factors which cause few women taking up leadership positions in primary schools in Masvingo Province in Zimbabwe. The study was qualitative and rooted in the interpretivist paradigm and was conducted in primary schools in Masvingo Province. The case study and the phenomenological designs were employed to allow for naturalistic methods. The research generated data through open ended questionnaire, semi structured interviews and focus group discussions. The study established that the involvement and interest of women in leadership was low because of cultural factors being pursued in our society. It also reveals that there is a gradual understanding of certain communities who want women to hold posts in primary schools. The study recommends that concerted efforts should be put to empower women in accordance to the National Gender Policy so that they take part in leadership positions. Further research could look at leadership development programmers and their impact on school leadership.

Keywords: Culture, Women teachers, School Leadership.

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BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Culture has been noted as a very formidable force in the advancement of women to education leadership positions across the world. An understanding of cultural factors is pertinent especially how these factors influence gendered uptake of leadership posts in varied contexts across the world (Mangizi & Masheija, 2019; & Sunderland, 2020).

The demand for social justice in Zimbabwe after independence was a result of bottlenecks in access to school leadership by the majority of women. High level of social injustice was experienced in terms of gender equity and equality. Women were given scant attention and their place was considered as the home. Promotion of women to positions of authority in schools was never addressed due to the high level of marginalisation that was considered as a norm. To that end, the Zimbabwean government promulgated various women advancement policies to emancipate women from the bondages of such kind of slavery. Africa was considered as a black continent and the colour black meant lack of leadership skills and knowledge particularly for women. But the question that remains up to now is to interrogate the effectiveness of the gender policies to see whether women were entangled from the vicious cycle of cultural bond factors.

It goes without saying that the problems females faces are partially rooted in the pattern of

gender socialisation and belief systems. Enaifoghe (2018) shows that gender socialisation account for the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. Socialisation assigns gender roles which tend to discriminate women and side-line them to the periphery of power in any society. This results in a variety of adverse impacts on women in relation to their self-esteem, self-confidence, self-concept and achievement motive. Social expectations implanted into women during the socialisation stages, also hinder their motivation to take up leadership. A woman's nurturing role may thus be in conflict with leadership roles which require her to be less nurturing but more aggressive in her approach.

Men are generally socialised to tackle and attack problems, override obstacles, overcome difficulties and always take the offensive. On the other hand, women are socialised to be silent even regarding their pains. Njoroge in Madimbo (2012:29) points out that "... because she was silent over her trials and tribulations, my grandmother was praised as a good woman". Even in Zimbabwean society, women are socialised to be silent, submissive and confined to the domestic sphere. Ngunjiri (2016) notes that not only is this passivity expected and endorsed, it is also reinforced and affirmed so that most women expect it of themselves. Thus, the socialisation process instils in females a 'blind obedience' disposition. Women are expected to obey patriarchal decisions without questioning. Edmunds *et al.* (2016) found that the

expected blind obedience and submission inhibit the development of initiative and independence thought in women.

Literature shows that gender based stereotyping has a big impact on how people perceive female leadership. Alzeiby (2021) argues that stereotyping connected to gender has negative employment implications and blocks women's advancement in leadership. Maniam (2018) asserts that over the century's societies all over the world have developed ideas about what it is to be a man or a woman. These ideas resulted in the loss of some fundamental truths about the inherent make up of women and replaced them with distorted views. It is these distorted views that come as illusions and stereotypes and most societies act upon them as truths. It is therefore apparent that women's behaviour is judged less favourably than that of men because it is perceived that leadership violates women's gender roles when they have to perform leadership behaviour (Alzeiby, 2021). Maniam (2018) further shows that in nearly every culture, women have been regarded as second class citizens, incapable of real strength, and as objects of sexual gratification and who lack intelligence. They are considered as having nothing to contribute to society, unless as the personal property of males. Thus, most people believe that it is natural for men and women to occupy different gender roles which subsequently make it difficult for them to decide to enter into roles associated with men, such as leading institutions. The result is that women teachers fail to apply for school leadership positions. This serves to reinforce the stereotype notion that women cannot be leaders. In other words, women socialised in such a way may find it difficult to opt to hold a public office such as being a school head and hence would not apply when advertisements for such posts are flighted.

In their research in Kosovo, Harris & Trnvevic (2020) found that women might have the support of their husbands in pursuing educational leadership but such support is more moral and less concrete in sharing responsibilities. This results in males being at an advantage in as far as progression in the leadership ladder is concerned. The rhetoric of women empowerment in the workplace is found to be further entrenching the domination of males over females as women have not been relieved of their cultural obligations which continue in the socio-cultural sphere. Women have to compete with the same men who dominate them in the families at the same level in the workplace. Thus, male cultural domination has been observed to contribute to women's lack of support in seeking leadership roles.

It has been widely seen that for women teachers, family orientation far outweighs career orientation (Harris & Trnvevic, 2020). Thus, family/work constraints can lead women to pull double

duty with home and work responsibilities. This negatively affects women's interest in school leadership positions. A study by Bayen (2016) shows that in many countries, traditions continue to emphasise women's primary roles as mothers and housewives and restrict them to those roles. A traditionally strong patriarchal value system favours sexually segregated roles and traditional cultural values militate against the advancement, progress and participation of women in processes that may advance their leadership capabilities in organisations. Societies around the world are dominated by an ideology that believes that women's place is in the home. As professionals, women can only play the roles of working mothers, which is generally poorly paid and does not motivate them into leadership positions. Against this background, it is seen that in most countries women are faced with the unequal challenge of balancing the demands of a professional career with family obligation (Harris & Trnvevic, 2020).

Glass & Alison (2016) carried out a qualitative research and observed that the average school leader spends more than fifty hours a week at work including night meetings and sporting events. This type of work often is not appealing to younger women teachers and to people who prefer a better balance between work and family. Accordingly, some women teachers would avoid promotion for the fear of being viewed negatively by society and so they have to get permission first from the husbands. Thus, it is widely seen that most women still look for other individuals to make decisions for them in spite of the gender equity policies which have been adopted in the country.

On promotion, workplaces do not consider the dual role of women which leads to inadvertent gender discrimination. Women who pursue career success in leadership have been found to experience psychological conflict and work overload in performing work and family roles. This scenario poses a question of how female teachers can construct their leadership identities since their identities are embedded in social and family life as well as hegemonic leadership discourses and historical cultural discourses of gender (Zhao & Jones, 2017). Thus, when female teachers are posted away from their families for promotion, they may not take it up as a result of their dual obligations. Promotions for some women invariably detach and uproot them from their families which may impact on their administrative prowess.

One common argument of occupational sex segregation is the assumption that women's primary allegiance is to the home and family. They are expected to preserve traditional family values alongside job responsibilities (Harris & Trnvevic, 2020: 142). Thus, they seek undemanding jobs so that they can better attend to their household responsibilities because of the challenge of balancing their professional commitment

with their family obligations. All these sentiments above result in women teachers not wishing to occupy school leadership positions. On promotion, some women are detached and uprooted from their families and this may impact on their administrative prowess as well.

Statement of the Problem

Inclusion of women in school leadership at primary school level is an area of concern in Zimbabwe. The imbalance between men and women in school leadership is targeted at removing the glass ceiling for female teachers, thereby improving their potential to enter educational leadership. It has been noted that women have suffered much discrimination in terms of opportunity to lead in schools. As a result of this discrimination, quite a number of policies have been crafted to remove the gender imbalances. However, regardless of the promulgation of these policies still very few women take up leadership positions in schools. This study, therefore, sought to find out how cultural factors impact on these imbalances in primary school leadership in Zimbabwe. The question to be answered is: How does culture impact on women taking up school leadership positions?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the social cultural factors that cause gender imbalances in primary school leadership in Zimbabwe

CONCEPTUAL FRAME WORK

Culture

Culture is a ubiquitous term that is used to describe the way and systems of living of a particular people. The dictionary definition of the word culture refers to the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively (Oxford Language Dictionary, 2022).

The ideas, customs and social behaviour of a particular people or society. This refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spartial relations, concepts of the universe and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving (Rosaldo, 2020).

In its broadest sense, it is a cultivated behaviour, that is the totality of a person's learned, accumulated experience which is socially transmitted or more briefly it is human behaviour through social learning (Li & Karakowsky, 2021).

Kroeber & Kuckhonn (1952) were some of the early protagonists of culture. These two made a historical and comparative compilation of the definitions and origins of the word culture. Kroeber & Kuckhonn (1952) made the definition of culture and the

concept a majestic concept. Culture encompasses distinct academic disciplines, national traditions and historical periods.

From the 1930s to the 1960s, most American Anthropologists primarily focused on culture as an object of study. Culture definition in anthropological circles was derived from von Herder (1744-1803). After which is Tylor (1871) definition and conceptualisation of culture. This was then covered by Boas (1940) who together with his students at University of Columbia made the concept of culture central to American anthropology. This gets us to Kroeber & Kluckhonn (1952) assertions of the concept of culture which forms the foundation of the definitions of culture today.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Role Congruity Theory

The research was informed by the Role Congruity Theory of prejudice toward females propounded by Eagly & Karau (2002) as cited in Mwale and Dodo (2017). The theory argues that perceived incongruity between the female gender role and leadership roles leads to two forms of prejudice perceiving women less favourably than men as potential occupants of leadership roles and evaluating behaviour that fulfils the prescriptions of a leader role less favourably when it is evicted by a woman (Heilman, 2001; Eagly & Karau, 2002; & Eagly *et al.*, 2004)in Mwale & Dodo (2017).The role congruity theory contends that gender stereotypes in leadership that women take care and men take charge (Dodge *et al.*, 1995; Heilman, 2001; & Hoyt & Burnette, 2013),in Mwale & Dodo (2017).

It is also argued that positions of power and influence in society have traditionally been occupied by men ,whereas woman have historically held lower status positions (Horry & Burnette, 2013) in Mwale & (Dodo 2017). Resultantly, it is difficult for women to become leaders and to archive success in leadership roles especially in the developing country like Zimbabwe where information flow is slow and restricted.

Literature

Mwale and Dodo in Mugizi & Mashaja (2019) in a 2017 study of rural Sanyati in Zimbabwe found out that the marginalisation of women in leadership in the region nominated from conservative elements and practices contained in culture. This is in time with what Runhare & Gordon (2004) found out in their study in Masvingo Province where women teachers experience, gender insensitive, work environment ,hours and community environment were not adequately supportive .

METHODOLOGY

The study was rooted in the interpretivist philosophy. The research was qualitative in nature seeking to understand human behaviors and experience influenced by sociocultural norms. A phenomenological design was adapted in this study because of its concern with the descriptive analysis of experience. Neubauer *et al.* (2019:91) define phenomenology as an approach to research that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it”, thus, in this study the researcher chose the phenomenological design as it involves the study of minimal participation of female teachers in educational, leadership, how the phenomenon manifest in their experiences, how they perceived and what meaning it had on the subjective experience of each female teacher.

The research population was derived from women teachers, senior women teachers, women deputy heads and women heads, they were purposively selected. Forty nine participants from various schools in the province were sampled and deemed enough for the research.

Data collection was necessitated through the use of in depth interviews; focus group discussion as well as questionnaires. These tools sought to ensure quality and reliability of information through triangulation. Thirty questionnaires were distributed to senior women teachers while in depth interviews were conducted with women deputy heads and women heads then there was one focus group discussion. All the ethical research were strictly followed to ensure that participants engaged voluntarily and aware of the implication thereto.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings were discussed following thematic approach as follows;

Career and Family Burdens

In response to this research item the participants had to say that;

“There were cultural and social factors that are experienced which contribute towards women and representation in school leadership.”

Women teachers, women senior teachers, deputy heads say that;

“Women have double burden to choose between career and family because they have to balance the two.”

Women senior teachers impressed that;

“Divorce, separation, being widowed, gender bias and inferiority complex, impede women from taking up leadership positions.”

One senior women teacher say;

“Conflicts and divorce are challenges to women. The women teachers should obey their husbands so the aspirants’ women senior teachers will hesitate to take up the posts”.

This was according to Eniafoghe (2018) who pointed out that all those excerpts impede many women teachers to take up these positions. Once divorced, the women teacher is disturbed socially and spiritually and most of the time one would focus on those problems on the expense of administrative issues.

Submissive to Husbands

The majority of women senior Teachers stated that;

“Women are responsible for attending many social activities in the community therefore because of their nature of work, they may not consider taking up other professional leadership position as important.”

Women heads supported this by saying that;

“Women should be submissive to men and should stay at home and added duties and responsibilities as well as social expectations that change like leadership positions are not worth the risk of destabilising their family foundations.”

Women Deputy heads say that;

“Socially, men are regarded as bread winners and heads of families and should also head institutions.”

Women teachers supported this saying;

“Culturally, in-laws expect a woman to be at home fulltime. Most woman would not prefer complicating their lives and hence would not take up leadership post and do what is expected by in-laws to be closer to the family rather than taking up in a lot of responsibilities.”

This was in agreement with Ngunjiri (2016) who stated that woman teachers shoulder a lot of responsibilities which make them fail to perform well once offered a post. A woman is expected to run a home by giving both the children and extended family full support. A woman teacher goes for maternity leave abrogates all other duties expected of her, thus leaving a gap of leadership.

Heavy load of Responsibilities

One of the senior woman say;

“Most female teachers do not take up leadership position because, socially a female teacher shoulders heavy load of responsibilities. Taking up leadership position especially senior teacher post will add responsibility without meaningful compensation.”

Woman heads say;

“They pay a motherhood penalty across fields relating to just to the time and medical care of pregnancy and child birth, greater maternity involvement, breast feeding and persistence tendency to a larger care of childcare as the child grows. Women heads who have children are much more likely to take more responsibility for childcare than their own partners”.

The researcher found overwhelming responses concerning this impediment for women teachers to take up leadership positions in the education system.

Women senior teachers stated that;

“Culturally, expectations with regards to women position in the family is an impediment to promotion. As a patriarchal society of a female aspirant will find it very hard to take up leadership position because the culture discourage them so leading in a patriarchal and cultural norms and such maybe traps for a matrimonial form of leadership from female.”

One of the women senior teachers stated that;

“Lack of cultural support for minorities, because are expected not to have aspiration to assume leading roles but follows, this bars women to take up leadership positions at primary school “

This was in agreement with Mwale & Dodo (2017) who posited that culture does not allow women teachers to lead men. The Zimbabwean culture is not western culture therefore women are not expected to raise their heads above men.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is need for concerned efforts in Masvingo province to empower woman in accordance to the National Gender Policy so that they take part in leadership in the Province. Some archaic cultural philosophies and norms should be ignored by the society.

Woman teachers should not be denied equal access to education, training and gainful employment opportunities. The society should not be sceptically look at women teachers but appreciate and tap into what a woman leader brings in the leading process, also woman leaders should support one another on the upward leader of leadership in the Province.

Cultural factors contribute towards underrepresentation of woman teachers in primary school leadership. This research concluded that culturally and biblically woman have to comply with

norms and values of the society. This research concludes that some woman teachers are not ready to stand in front of male teachers and give them instructions both traditional and organisational structures, men are on the helm of position and power , so woman always relate to that and one is discouraged to hold managerial posts. The research established misconceptions surrounding the physical makeup of different sex. The belief that men are culturally suitable for leadership because of their physical strength has disadvantaged women in development.

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