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Female Leadership Dilemmas in Primary Schools: A Case Study of Primary Schools in Harare Province in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The study sought to explore dilemmas faced by female school leaders in primary schools in Kambuzuma, Warren Park and Kuwadzana areas of Harare Province in Zimbabwe. The study was largely rooted in a qualitative research paradigm. It made use of a case study research design. The study's population was drawn from 18 primary schools in the studied areas. It made use of a conveniently stratified sample of 15 research participants comprising five female heads, one male deputy head and five female teachers-in-charge (TICs). The sample was drawn from five primary schools that had a predominantly female leadership. The data that the participants generated was ranked and coded using numbers one to ten to suit the emergent design. Firstly, the study found out that married female school leaders faced the dilemma of choosing between marriage and their leadership career. Secondly, the research participants faced a dilemma of negative societal attitudes towards them. Thirdly, female school leaders lacked the support of other fellow female subordinates.

The study recommends the Public Service Commission should not promote women for the sake of promotion but should do so on the grounds of merit and seniority. Furthermore, female school heads need to work very hard and prove that they are worthy to occupy those posts so that male bosses will change their 'unspoken' corporate cultures of discrimination against female school leaders.

Background to the study

There appears to have been a lot of talk pertaining to the leadership

position among Zimbabwean women. The position of women at different levels, socially, politically and professionally has led to debates on the “women issue” (Mrs Joyce Mujuru, the first female Vice President of the Republic of Zimbabwe - *The Herald*, 3 April 2005).

The population of women in Zimbabwe is much bigger than that of men as they comprise 52% of the entire population. Until the 1950s, very few women were sent to school beyond Grade 7. Parents in those days preferred to spend money on the boy child than on girls (Mulcaly and Sevilla, 2003). Culturally, girls were given menial roles of tending fields and children which roles did not require high educational qualifications. Zimbabwean parents now treat their children equally affording them the same opportunities for acquiring higher educational qualifications for accessing management jobs (Ingersoll, 2001).

Many organisations are headed by men (Simmons, 1996). Amongst other concerns, the study sought to confirm or refute the general claim in the literature that few organisations are headed by female leaders who face a lot of challenges (Darling-Hammond and Sykes, 1999).

The disadvantaged position of women in relation to men in the workplaces is related to low educational attainment and skills in many developing countries (Winn, 2001). Enrolment in primary and secondary schools for women increased in Zimbabwe but still, they lag behind in tertiary education and critical skills acquisition (Zvobgo, 2000).

Women are tasked with the care of the children, responsibility for the economy and ultimately to ensure the success of their husbands (Davidson and Burker, 2000). What remains to be explored is the degree of applicability of such findings in local situations.

Statement of the problem

Some organisations in Zimbabwe seem to have more women who are highly educated and holding high professional qualifications than their male counterparts, but they do not hold managerial positions.

Research questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What are the dilemmas/challenges that female leaders in schools face?
- 2) What can be done to overcome dilemmas that female leaders face in running schools?

Literature review

Issues surrounding dilemmas that female leaders face in running their organisations are currently debated in Zimbabwe.

Functionalist theory

The functionalist theory argues that “Men fill instrumental roles in society, whereas, women fill expressive roles and presume that this arrangement works to the benefit of the society, (Russell, 1997). The theory stresses that people's socialisation into prescribed roles is a major force that causes gender inequality. It recognises and accepts that there are gender disparities caused by specialisation that people receive from infancy right up to the time they choose their careers. Functionalism further purports that women are better off if they stay at home performing a socialising role than going to work.

Conflict theory

The theory of conflict exists in society due to the different biological make up of men and women. The theory explains that women are disadvantaged by inequalities between themselves and men. To avoid conflict, societies have resorted to division of labour. Most societies observe some gender division of labour within the home, with women taking primary responsibility for caring for the family, whereas, men tend to be associated with the work outside the home (Spotlight on Zimbabwe, 1994). A similar study was carried out by Coltrane and Adams (1997:323-347) who found out that:

- Women were more likely to be shown in families.
- Women were less likely to hold jobs than men.
- Women were less likely to be employed in professional jobs than men.

- Women were less likely to exercise authority than men.
- Women were more likely to be employed in service or clerical jobs than men.
- Women were less likely to display active behaviour than men.

Therefore, both functionalist and conflict theories believe that education performs an important function of bestowing status in women (Management News, 2000).

Glass ceiling, glass borders and glass walls theory

The dilemma of Glass Ceiling, Glass Borders and Glass Walls Theory is that of females failing to build their own corporation as a way to try to circumvent the constraints that they face in organisations that they lead (Cole, 2000; Robbins, 2003).

Davidson and Burke (2000:16) argue that women who perform well in their roles of management find it difficult to negotiate moves in commercial functions. Women in these positions of leadership negotiate moves in entrepreneurial skills. Women in those positions of leadership in organisations are quick to leave the positions to run their own businesses. Davidson and Burke (2000) further noted that:

- Their contributions are not valued.
- They are not taken seriously.
- They have feelings of isolation because small numbers of women occupy top positions in organisations.

Traditional stereotyping

The traditional role of women is one of the barriers that hinder progress in their advancement (Sekaran & Leong, 1988). The researchers note that stereotyping starts from years of life when boys and girls are socialised differently. They also report that teachers too play a role in gender socialisation. Teachers traditionally pay more attention towards males who as a result, develop better self-esteem than their counterparts. Career choices made by women reflect traditional stereotyping. Similarly, Davidson and Burke (2000) note

that women are at a disadvantage because they are generally socialised not to be assertive, aggressive or seek power or control. This stereotyping was observed from a non-African and non-Zimbabwean perspective.

Loneliness

Above and beyond the dilemma stereotyping, Sekaran and Leong (1988:17) confirm that in terms of loneliness, “the higher the woman climbs, the lonelier she gets, because there is less support available”. The woman manager may be the only woman in a room full of males. These are some of the constraints why women leave their managerial positions in corporate to business ownership.

Women versus men leadership

The stereotype of management which needs to be verified is that better managers are masculine. Supportive of that view, Powell (1988:48) states that “men tend to be more influential and women are more easily influenced in most settings”. On the same note, Henning and Jardin (as cited in Powell, 1988:151) observe that “men are cleverer and more definite in setting goals than women”. This is a desirable quality in management. Women managers are assumed not to possess the desirable quality in management.

Marriage

A married female manager does not have time to socialise after work because there are other obligations waiting for her at home. This is the other traditional conception which is the centrality to women's role which affects women's attitudes towards their work plans and is the root of many discriminatory attitudes and practices in the work places (Russell, 1997; Women in Leadership and Governance Institute, undated). Professional women have to make difficult decisions of choosing between marriage and career. A married manager gives full attention to his job while the female one concentrates on the family at the expense of her career (Chapman & Mulkeen, 2003, Davidson & Burke, 2000).

Research methodology

The study was largely qualitative. In this study, qualitative research

was therefore a comprehensive of phenomena using a prolonged first-hand presence at the site by the researchers. It enabled us to get female school leaders' experiences, feelings and opinions regarding dilemmas they face in running primary schools in Kambuzuma, Warren Park and Kuwadzana areas of Harare, Zimbabwe.

The study was a case study. A case study, according to Thomas and Nelson (2001), Seale (2006) and Silverman (2006) is a form of descriptive research in which a single case is studied in depth to reach greater understanding about similar cases. We subscribed to the view that Gill and Johnson (2002:157) advanced by pointing out that, "in theory building, the case study research may perhaps be most appropriate when little is known about a topic ...".

Population

The study's population comprised of 18 school heads, 18 deputy school heads and 18 teachers-in-charge (TICs) of primary schools in Kambuzuma, Warren Park and Kuwadzana areas of Harare, Zimbabwe.

The study's sample was conveniently stratified in order to come up with five female school heads, four female deputy heads, one male deputy head and five female TICs. The three strata by leader level represented the school leaders in the studied schools.

Data were collected during a period of five weeks between 23 August 2009 and 30 September 2009. All the questionnaires were completed and collected on 30 September 2009. Interviews were also completed on the same day.

Data were captured, analysed and interpreted throughout the course of this study since this was a qualitative study (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Cresswell, 2003; Silverman, 2006). Presentation and analysis of data and discussion procedures were done according to logical themes that emerged from the data that was generated by the participants (Punch, 2004; Pearce, 2005).

Data presentation, analysis and discussion

Data were gathered through questionnaires and interviews.

Interviews followed up the questionnaires using the same open-ended questions. These data are presented using tables and figures, analysed and interpreted below.

Demographic characteristics of the sample used

Fifteen copies of open-ended questionnaire were physically distributed to the five conveniently sampled schools. They were meant to collect data from five female school heads, five female teachers-in-charge (TICs) and four female deputy heads and one male deputy head.

Table 1

Themes from the qualitative interpretations of questionnaires and interviews.

N = 15

No.	Theme	Number
1	Being judged on double standards	15
2	Feeling misunderstood	15
3	Stereotyping	15
4	Marriage issue	15
5	Lack of support by other female colleagues	14
6	Negative societal attitudes	13
7	Low morale and commitment among teachers	13
8	Verbal abuse	12
9	Insubordination	10
10	Ability to hold bold decisions	9

In Table 1, the generated data show that all research participants felt that female school leaders were being judged on double standards.

One of the participants pointed out that many female school heads feel that similar behaviour is judged differently according to whether it is displayed by a man or a woman. For instance, if a woman shows anger, she is likely to be seen as hysterical while a man behaving similarly would just be letting off steam. Another participant noted that female school heads find it hard to accept instructions and authority from other women and men who work for or with women are laughed at by their wives and friends. These findings seem to reveal that female school leaders need to exercise virtues of trust, fairness, firmness, frankness and diligence whenever they would be dealing with their subordinates.

All research participants also indicated that female school leaders face another dilemma of feeling misunderstood by their colleagues. One participant had this to say:

Some female school heads thought that men at work had false impressions of them as people and did not really understand what they were like and what motivated them.

Another participant pointed out that:

Some of the misconceptions more commonly suggested were that working women must have unsatisfactory marriages, neglect their children, cannot be worth the money they are paid and are unlikely to take the job seriously.

These remarks tend to point out that female school leaders were not highly regarded at their workplaces.

Related to the dilemma of being misunderstood, all the fourteen female and one male participant identified stereotyping as another dilemma. It was viewed as one of the greatest let downs to female advancement, progress and success. Indeed, one participant noted that according to cultural beliefs, for example, men are more intelligent than women. This finding appears to be consistent with Davidson and Burke (2000) who explained that cultural beliefs are so strong that women tend to underestimate themselves. It appears from these results that female school leaders might be lacking power and influence to lead their schools to success.

The fourth dilemma that female school heads face as perceived by all participants was the marriage issue. While marriage is highly valued in most African societies, it may cease to do so when female leaders get promoted at one's workplace. One participant contended that:

In the wake of current economic hardships, I contemplate quitting the job in order to fulfil family obligations. I also face the dilemma of having a role conflict between running a home/raising children and performing at work, not having enough time to run the home and work performance, not being a good wife/mother, not having to take work home with them.

The preceding participant's concerns are echoed by Davidson and Burke (2000) who argue that a married male manager gives full attention to his job while the female counterpart concentrates on the family at the expense of her career. In view of the above position, we felt that female school leaders' failure to strike a balance between marriage and work might comprise their dual role. If they are not careful, they might put both their roles on the rock.

Lack of support for the female school leaders by their female subordinates was another teething dilemma they face. This dilemma was likely to be more pronounced in large urban schools which have more female teachers than their male counterparts. This implies that the female school head may not be the only woman in a room full of males and has female counterparts. In that regard, she should not be found to be feeling lonely when in fact, she leads more female teachers than male ones. These observations seem to confirm what Sekaran and Leong (1988:17) found out when they remarked, "... the higher the woman climbs up the ladder, the lonelier she gets, because there is less support available". We feel that women should not be their greatest enemies by pulling down their female counterparts in leadership positions.

Negative societal attitudes constitute the sixth dilemma that thirteen research participants advance as one of the challenges at their work places. The society's attitude towards women progress acts as a

barrier. The common view is that women are unlikely to display the commitment necessary for a career. One participant explained that women are unreliable in high level jobs and better suited to lower paid jobs often performed on temporary basis. This observation was highly unfortunate because it was made by the only male participant in the study who also happened to be an understudy of one of the studied five female school heads. The concerned participant appeared to have attitudinal problems towards female leadership. Female leaders should not be deprived of the opportunity to exercise the leadership capacity because socio-economic and cultural factors, as well as their ideas about their position in society.

This generated data also exhibit that (13/15) research participants viewed low morale and commitment among teachers as one other dilemma that female school leaders face in running their schools. Schools under study seem to fail to realise their goals because of low teacher morale and commitment. When teachers' morale and commitment are low, it follows that they are demotivated and dissatisfied (Ingersoll, 2001). To go round this dilemma, female school leaders under study might need to explore possible ways to motivate their staff.

Twelve research participants agreed that female school leaders under study faced a dilemma of verbal abuse. Women in managerial positions are in no way immune to verbal abuse. One participant lamented that:

Verbal abuse is indeed, a common extreme form of behaviour that goes between female school heads and some colleagues and members of the society, especially those from a political front.

The above observation implies that female school leaders could be targets of verbal abuse as a result of an unappreciative society and colleagues. Teachers and members of society therefore need to be informed that a leader is a leader irrespective of gender.

Last but not least, insubordination was perceived as another dilemma that female school leaders experience in Kuwadzana, Kambuzuma and Warren Park schools of Harare in Zimbabwe. 10

research participants noted the presence of this dilemma. To demonstrate the existence of this dilemma, one participant had this to say:

Teachers pretend to be attentive when female leaders are selling ideas, objectives, plans, projects, programmes and policies to them. They do so to please their leaders when in actual fact they do not translate into action when they are left on their own. They have a growing tendency of ignoring what their heads propose once the female leaders are out of sight.

Implied in this observation is the fact that teachers, regardless of gender, appear to undermine their female leaders. It is so unfortunate that a lot of such insubordination goes unpunished. All things being equal, insubordinate teachers need to face the wrath of the law.

The final dilemma that the studied female school leaders face is inability to make bold decisions. Nine research participants were in agreement with the preceding dilemma. Three participants concurred that female leaders lack confidence to make bold decisions pertaining to class allocation, exclusion of pupils as well as recommending suspension of some members of staff. They prefer making consultations to independent decisions. . They therefore need to stand firm and be resolute in whatever decisions they make.

This observation is compatible with Davidson and Burke (2000) who found out that female leaders are hesitant in making bold decisions. Coltrane and Adams (1997) also found out that women were less likely to exercise authority than men. By implication female leaders in the schools under study need to awaken from their slumbers if ever they are to be able to make bold decisions. The researchers contest this finding on the grounds that female leaders are equally good in making bold decisions regarding their work. For example, they can warn, charge or reprimand teachers who may be absconding or neglecting duty.

Recommendations

The study came out with the following recommendations:

Education systems should prove that they are gender sensitive by using a quota system throughout their recruitment and promotion policies.

The Public Service Commission should not promote women in the areas under study for the sake of promotion but should promote them by virtue of their high educational qualifications, maturity, experience and right aptitude for the job.

Women in leadership positions should be made to feel free to exercise authority and get support from other females.

Female school leaders need to work very hard and prove themselves worthy to occupy those posts so that male bosses will change their “unspoken” corporate cultures of discrimination against them.

The Government through the Public Service Commission should continue to review and enact laws that monitor the appointment of females into leadership positions so as to minimise gender and cultural biases against females.

The government should also encourage deserving female candidates to apply for leadership positions so that females are equitably represented in schools.

Verbal abuse of female school leaders by any one should be punishable upon prompt prosecution.

Sexism divides females and sets them against one another. It should never be allowed to have a place in a school situation.

Gender issues and disparities should be addressed among children at an early age. Gender issues should be incorporated in all curricular at all levels of education.

The government and other stakeholders must educate and encourage parents to treat boys and girls equally as “the son preference is arguably the root cause of gender imbalances experience at the studied female leaders' work places”.

Last but not least, female school leaders should try to create a conducive and an enabling environment for their subordinates by involving them in planning and decision making so as to deal with low morale and commitment among teachers.

Further studies need to be conducted at a much wider and larger scale at either provincial or national levels using quantitative and

mixed research approaches in the capabilities between male and female school leaders who hold some educational qualifications and who are given equal opportunities.

Conclusion

The paper investigated dilemmas encountered by female school leaders in Kambuzuma, Warren Park and Kuwadzana areas of Harare in Zimbabwe. These dilemmas were somehow seen to be hindering female school leaders from discharging their duties effectively and efficiently.

Some of the factors which contributed to the dilemmas that female school leaders faced were marriage and children, attitude of society towards female leaders and female subordinates. Female subordinates were seen to be pulling fellow female school leaders down as they did not fully support them.

The paper found out that female school leaders experienced discrimination in terms of how they were treated by the society in general. One could conclude that the education system in Zimbabwe is yet to treat all employees equally.

The paper further pointed out that some female school leaders who were married valued their marriage more than their jobs. They were presented with a very hard task to choose between their jobs and marriages.

Few female school leaders who managed to get to the top are an indication that when equal opportunities are presented to women, they can make a difference, though there are small numbers of women in schools.

The social and cultural factors interweave to form a barrier to women advancement at their work places. Cultural beliefs and norms are the root causes of women's plight.

The government must urge society to take up a radical change so that female school leaders are treated exactly the same way as their male counterparts.

Female school leaders were let down by lack of support by their

female subordinates.

Regarding the stereotyping dilemma, it might be concluded that women were unlikely to show the commitment suitable for a leadership career.

In terms of morale and commitment among teachers, female school heads were perceived as fuellers of a more demotivating and dissatisfying work environment.

In connection with insubordination and lack of confidence to make bold decisions, female school leaders could be blamed for not showing leadership charisma and expertise to win the hearts of their subordinate.

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