Experiences of Women in Managerial Positions in the Education System. A Case Study of Selected Secondary Schools in Lusaka District, Zambia.

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ABSTRACT

In Zambia, the situation of women in positions of power remains a sensitive and controversial issue. Women are mostly subjected to preconceptions that place them in challenging situations. This study sought to explore the experiences of women in management positions, and to examine the hindrances that these women leaders encounter. Using a qualitative strategy, thirty five women in school management positions were purposefully sampled from the research field comprised of seven secondary schools located in Lusaka District. Questionnaires, interview guide and focus group discussions were utilized as tools to gather data. Findings revealed that women administrators have hidden talents and competencies, as they perform in an ethical manner using different leadership styles. Yet, as showed in the results, women administrators experience a number of challenges and hurdles that stand in their pathways or occur when performing their leadership roles. The current study advocates for getting rid of unnecessary and harmful prejudices that prevent women from arise in order to allow them to express their inner potential. Besides, this study suggests more women should come on board and share their experiences in management positions so that other women who may wish to join them have some ideas of where to start from. Therefore, is a need to empower women not only by bridging the gap that exists between men and women,

Keywords: women administrators, managerial, challenges, talent

INTRODUCTION

Ongaki, Omwoyo and Musa (2015) revealed that women have leadership inspiration, determination and abilities. But their aspirations are dampened by discrimination and the lack of availability of management positions. However, considering patriarchal beliefs and prejudice that women face their management success is still not well understood. Although numerous women studies have been offered on the importance of women's appointment to decision making, a huge gap continues to be experienced in this field, with the majority of women visibly placed in the lower echelons in the broader SSA (Bush, 2009). In Africa, for example, women have made considerable gains in the political, economic and social development of the continent but despite their efforts, they are still widely marginalized within the corridors of power and decision making (Rindfleish, and Sheridan, 2003).

Bush (2007) states that there is now a steadily growing pool of female administrators in educational leadership positions. This is despite persistent under-representation of females in education as in many other occupations. It is this growing pool of females who have managed to advance into leadership positions whose experiences and perceptions of leadership may be vital to the understanding of leadership from a

female perspective. The more school administrators appreciate and value women administrators, the more women may want to lead. Ongaki ,Omwoyo and Musa (2015) argued that women are hesitant to move to leadership roles due to competing obligations of family and a pervasive culture of sexism that makes an already difficult and somewhat unappealing role even less desirable for teachers considering an administrative or principal leadership role. In order for more women to embrace principal opportunities, researchers must produce more scholarship to help women lead more effectively and educate others about the context in which women leaders thrive.

Most recently, the Zambian government recognized the need to promote equitable gender representation at all levels of decision making through affirmative action such as developing criteria for recruitment, appointment and promotion of more women to advisory and decision making positions (Kalumba, Daka, Kalimaposo, Phiri, Mulenga-Hagane and Mugala, 2023). In order to address the problem of gender imbalance in decision making positions, the government adopted the National Gender Policy on 6th March, 2000. One of the goals of the National Gender Policy was to achieve equity in access to decision making positions between females and males at all levels with at least a 30% target share of women representation by the year 2005. This was in line with the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development, (Gender in Development Division, 2000). Because of this affirmative action by the Zambian government to enhance equity and equality by increasing the number of women in decision-making positions in all sectors including education, women are now found in highly skilled technical, managerial and decision-making positions that were previously meant for men.

Bush, (2010) reports that almost all educational reform reports have come to the conclusion that no nation can attain excellence in education without effective school leadership but this does not mean that only males make effective leaders, as Ng'ambi, (2015)state:

In any school environment, there must be an appreciation and respect for the qualities, skills and expertise be it male or female leader. Further, masculine characteristics, female characteristics and neutral characteristics with effective leadership interaction gives a new perspective one of androgyny, where performance is judged according to its rightness for that situation and not judged according to gender.

Nevertheless, the full participation of women in management of education institutions is critical both for wise decision-making and for numerous other financial, organizational culture, and relational reasons, as articulated by Madsen in a synthesis of the literature titled: "Why Do We Need More women in Leadership of Higher Education?" (Madsen, 2015). Interestingly, a key finding of the international research project of Gerzema and D'Antonio that involved 64,000 participants was the significant level of agreement by adult respondents (66%) and by male respondents (65%) with the statement: "The world would be a better place if men thought more like women" (Gerzema and D'Antonio 2013, p. 8). While working toward that goal, increasing the visibility and engagement of women in education leadership and management also merits urgent focused attention and energy.

Furthermore, gender issues, stereotypical perceptions and discrimination bring about problematic situations in educational spheres and remain a controversial subject along with women administration. Despite a number of efforts made by the authorities in recent years to empower women, men are still largely privileged to lead most educational institutions. Indeed, in Zambian societies, women are generally confined to the lower positions in educational work settings. Sociocultural heritage and organizational barriers are some of the factors that maintain women in inferior steps and affect their management potential (Ng'ambi, 2015). This is obviously not conducive to gender equality. In the Zambian context, the dominant traditional ideology related to patriarchal culture, which is profoundly entrenched amongst the individuals, presupposes subordination of women, often together with the exclusion of the public sphere and in particular, the educational settings. The stereotyping perceptions often led many women to lack confidence. However,

women themselves are building a perception that they sometimes are afraid to engage in public or private activities because of the social norms and cultural beliefs (Andela, Escandon, Garlo & Kamungi (2008). Yet, academic studies have found that women would be worthy administrators, which may help to address in some persistent issues in Zambian secondary schools, and indirectly contribute to schools advancement. Thus, the researcher intended to investigate the experiences of women in management position in the education system in selected secondary schools of Lusaka district.

Despite the stride taken by the Zambian Government towards appointing more women into leadership positions through the National Gender Policy (NGP), women continue to experience challenges in dispensing their management responsibilities (Rah, 2023). For instance, considering the patriarchal nature of most societies and households most women experience double workload (being responsible for domestic duties despite joining the formal work force (Bush & Coleman, 2009). Women's participation in management may likely have an impact on their social and personal lives and in turn may affect how they perform. Very few studies have documented the experiences of these females holding leadership and management positions in schools. Hence, this study seeks to investigate the experiences of women in management positions in the education system in selected secondary schools of Lusaka district.

The purpose of this study was to establish the experiences of women in school administrative positions in selected secondary schools in Lusaka district and to suggest ways of maximizing women's potential in their leadership abilities.

Research Questions

1. What are the personal factors that affect participation of women in school managerial positions in selected secondary schools in Lusaka District?
2. What strategies can be put in place to promote women participation in school managerial positions in selected secondary schools in Lusaka District?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

a). Liberal feminism

Liberal feminist theory was adopted in this study because it helped to explain the issues that damage women and discriminate against them in terms of their participation in school management, resulting in the demand for gender equality in communication and social skills so that they may be involved in leadership roles, thereby discouraging discrimination on the basis of biological differences. Different studies conducted in different countries show that men dominate leadership positions and that there is cultural dominance at school, which has resulted in the exclusion of women from the decision-making arena (Mbepera, 2017). The theory was used to analyze gender equality in leadership positions in Zambia. The study assumes that, among other factors, women are discriminated against in terms of obtaining senior management posts because of their sex rather than their ability and determination. Based on the theory, the study will examine how society's perception based on sex leads to the unequal acquisition of headship by men and women in the targeted schools, and how women are treated in schools.

Liberal feminist theory also "does not challenge patriarchy or any other fundamental structures of society, but rather looks for the removal of barriers that prevent women operating effectively in the public sphere on equal terms with men" (Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser, 2023). Therefore, liberal feminist theory lacks the internal (personal) and patriarchy-oriented factors that hinder women from reaching the top, and thus the Gender Organisation System (GOS) approach fills this gap. Despite these weaknesses inherent in liberal feminist theory, its strengths identified above are vital for gaining an understanding of female experience in

school administration in secondary school senior management. This study therefore combines the strengths of liberal feminist theory with the GOS approach to gain a full understanding of the experiences of women in management positions, thereby complementing its weaknesses.

b). Gender Organization System (GOS) approach

The GOS approach presents a holistic approach to the study's issues concerning women's management experience (Fagenson, 1990b). This approach proposes that women's actions and capacity to be involved in top management are influenced by the interaction of individuals, society and the institutional system in which the organization operates. Akpinar and Sposito (2013) hold that this interaction may lead to the under-representation of women in management positions in organizations. That is, it assumes that the presence of a few women in management is caused by both organizational and individual factors. This approach integrates the assumptions and arguments of the gender-centred and organizational structure perspectives (Fagenson, 1990a). It also argues that "an individual and his or her organization cannot be understood separate from the society (culture) in which he or she works. When the individual, the organization and the system in which they are embedded change, the other components change as well" (Parker & Fagenson, 1994, p. 19). Furthermore, in order to understand inequality in an organization, it is important to discover how men and women differ in their experience, how women are discriminated against in organizations, and how the system/society discriminates against and treats women (Fagenson, 1990a). That is to say, women's behavior in an organization is a result of both gender and organizational structure. The GOS approach is the most useful theoretical framework for women in leadership research (Akpinar-Sposito, 2013).

Another line of thought shows that societies describe the appropriate roles and behaviors expected of men and women (Nystén, 2022). These beliefs, gender role expectations and stereotypes concerning the role of men and women, as well as cultural values, may affect structures and institutional practice and women's behavior at work (Çitil, 2022). That is, some societies either encourage or discourage women from entering certain careers and developing aspirations relevant to management.

Moreover, based on this study, most staff and leaders who make recommendations for management positions may be socialized to give females subordinate ranks and to make them obedient listeners. With these attitudes and perceptions at work, there might be a greater probability of promoting more men than women to management positions. This perspective believes that women experience in top management positions in secondary schools because of individual and societal stereotypes and expectations, as well as cultural and organizational practices (Çitil, 2022).

REVIEWED LITERATURE

Scholars add that internal barriers to female involvement in management include perceiving that they lack career advancement opportunities and having a poor self-image (Maheshwari and Nayak, 2022). Researchers further have reported that gender-based socialization, lack of confidence, which leads to fear of failure, limited mobility and not being competitive, and interrupted career development due to child bearing and rearing, are internal barriers hindering women from becoming leaders (Nystén, 2022).

Taparia and Lenka, (2022) opines that less confidence is a barrier to women advancement to positions of leadership in that through confidence driven performances, society can succeed in demystifying those restrictive traditional perceptions which still apply to women, despite the fact that they are based on unfounded scientific grounds. Thus, only through performance can society be in a position to debunk stereotypes, biases and prejudices that still regard women as less confident to assume leadership positions.

Linked to the issue of spirituality and faith, which women site as a support structure in their leadership careers. The leadership style of women, which appealed to emotions and spirituality in their leadership and

decision-making process, was highlighted by studies (Rindfleish and Sheridan, 2003). Spirituality, often interwoven with religion, influences their work and helps them to manage life and work difficulties experienced as leaders. Tisa (2015:33) recommends that "women should be exposed to more meaningfu l tasks and furthermore, be placed in positions that demand accountability." Confidence, it should be understood, is not the thing believed in, but it is rather the belief in one's own mind, which has the power if unhindered, to bring about the desired result.

Further, Johannes, Liliweri, Gana and Nursalam, (2022) revealed that among numerous other factors that prevented women to seize opportunities to stand for nomination into leadership positions were that women were not encouraged to run for office and are not politically persuaded. In addition, the political ambition of women was outweighed by men's political ambition. The experience of women in the competitive political debate was seen as weak whilst men had a strong desire to win and were more

competitive in politics. Similarly, Gwirayi (2010) looked at the influence of gender on access to leadership positions. The study was conducted in the Student Representative Council among final year students at a Zimbabwean college. Among other factors, it aimed to understand students' criteria to elect their SRC. The study findings demonstrated that women were still marginalized, perpetuating women's leadership gap, and gender inequality. The study also highlighted institutional role in perpetuating inequality and institutional authorities need to ensure female representation in every SRC.

To be successful as leaders, women have to be strategic in their approach to leadership by becoming strategic thinkers, having knowledge of the rules of the game and invisible rules, knowing how to get resources and support, involving subordinates in decision-making, establishing support networks, and having cultural intelligences (Rindfleish and Sheridan, 2003). Of significance is the fact that these experiences and strategies deployed by women in management positions were not similar to those encountered by their male counterparts. This can be attributed to the normalization of the White and/or male body as the embodiment of knowledge, intelligence, and leadership qualities. Hence, women entering these positions do so as the "other." For Black women in a white-dominated context, double othering is experienced by virtue of their race and gender. Women in these spaces, however, tend to develop a commitment to social justice and see themselves as agents of change (Cheruto and Kyalo, 2010).

School achievement depends a lot, on how administrators enhance the relationship between the school and the school community**.** Davidson and Burke, (2016) state that school achievement depends greatly on the social capital around the school. Butt, Mackenzie and Manning (2010) maintain that the head of school, who has agreed to more equitable participation by the school community members in decision making, enables his/her school to achieve well. Correspondingly, Mbepera, (2017) argues that academic achievement is higher in female-led schools than in male-led ones. She argues that female administrators are likely to introduce and support strong staff development programs, to encourage innovation and to experiment with instructional approaches. Moreover, women are likely to stress the importance of instructional competence to teachers, and are attentive to completing instructional programs through the involvement of school members (Shakeshaft et al., 2014). Hence, through cooperation and involvement, the probability of developing a good relationship with the school community is high because the involvement of members of the school community leads to a common understanding for accomplishing school goals; eventually leading to a greater possibility of achieving school goals. Lumby (2006b) maintains that the participatory approach leads to effectiveness in the performance of female administrators.

METHODOLOGY

The research design for this study was a case study design that is analyzed largely through qualitative methods. Qualitative researchers tend to analyze their data inductively. In a case study design the researcher

is allowed to gain concrete, contextual, in-depth knowledge about a specific problem. It also allows the researcher to explore the key characteristics, meanings, and implications of the case. Since "meaning" is of essential concern to the qualitative approach (Ponelis, 2015), the participant's perspectives on their own conceptions of practice will be the focus. Hence, the framework developed in this paper supports evaluating participant perspectives. Findings were discussed in relation to existing knowledge with the aim of demonstrating how the present study has contributed to expanding the knowledge base.

All the public secondary schools in Lusaka district formed the study population. The participants in this research are female school administrators in selected public secondary schools of Lusaka District. For this qualitative study, purposive sampling was used. The seven secondary schools were chosen because they were identified as schools in which they were a number of females in management. The criteria for site selection of schools included the number of women in managerial positions, socioeconomic status of the school, and average academic performance. For the purpose of this study, a total sample of thirty five participants was involved from the selected schools, comprising three female head teachers, four female deputy head teachers, eleven female guidance teachers, and seventeen female heads of departments who were selected according to their responsibilities. Participants for interviews were chosen to gather information and experiences that were important to understanding the focus of the research. These interview participants represented different levels of the female school administrators, and their experiences and opinions added to the information gathered on the experiences of women in management. The District Education Board Secretary (DEBs) office was contacted regarding this qualitative case study and the process of selecting the participating schools.

The researchers used questionnaires, interviews and focus group to collect data and the data collected was recorded and transcribed. A couple of open-ended questions were posed to which administrators responded verbally. In these processes useful information that may be closely linked to their experiences can emerge. The individual responses were analyzed, compared and categorized with the results of transcription of the focus group interview, and subsequently triangulated and interpreted to draw conclusions.

The researchers analyzed the data starting with the categorization and organization of data in search of patterns, critical themes and meanings that emerged from the data. A process sometimes referred to as "open coding" (Wickham, 2016) was employed by the researcher. The researcher identified and tentatively named the conceptual categories into which the phenomena observed was grouped.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Personal factors that affect women's participation in school administration and Skepticism from the society towards a female administrator

In this section the women's views on the experiences they had as female administrators in their schools were discussed. Some of the schools were experiencing their first female head teacher, while others had had previous female head teachers. For those who were promoted within the same schools where they had worked as teachers, as they did not have to deal with the physical movement, as well as the change in official duties. They worked in familiar surroundings where they knew the teachers, the learners, the school management committee and the parents. The major challenge they experienced was resistance to new routines. Their styles of leadership were also compared to those of the previous head teachers.

HT1 was promoted within her school and she confirmed a fairly smooth transition.

'We had always worked as a team in our school. I think that was one of the things that encouraged me to accept this position. I was familiar with the environment. I just stepped from one office into another. People

took time, though, to take to anything new I tried introducing, but I still think it's easier that way as opposed to moving to a new school'.

Several of them admitted to having had the feeling that they needed to prove themselves in their work in order for them to be fully accepted. Most of them reported slowly feeling accepted as they continued interacting with the parents, and mastered their administrative duties. Enyew and Mihrete, (2018) assertion that traditionally public perception tended to favor men as better able than women to handle school leadership holds true where the experiences of the participants in this study are concerned. This notion also reflects the Social Role Theory (Baehr, 2017) which explains how each gender becomes focused on whatever roles are available to them, based on the expectation of the society, thus influencing the society's attitude and reception of women into leadership roles.

Some challenging nature of the female administrators' jobs was compounded by some particular factors that emerged from the data, which included accountability issues and parents' grievances and expectations. HT 2 indicated,

'Whatever happens in this school, all the questions land in my office first. If exams results are bad, they will wave placards and chant 'Eunice must go!' If money is misappropriated, they will come for me first. If a child gets hurt, I will be the one to answer. Don't you think this is too much for one person?'

Although these female administrators made use of delegation and consultation to ease their workload, they still felt overwhelmed by the fact that they were held accountable for everything that happened in the school. This research study confirms the findings in Mills, (2017). Where they noted that school heads have a key role to play in managing their schools because they are the main decision-makers. The success of the school and the degree to which they reach their educational aims depend on the school head and his or her governance. On the same point, Aketch and Simatwa (2010:486) noted that in Kenya the government and all the other stakeholders look upon the head teacher for the effective implementation of any programme introduced at primary level.

The grievances of parents are common in schools, contributing to the stress of the administrator who has to work through the grievance process to reach a solution. When an offended parent comes to school, the first person who has to respond to her or his grievance is the administrator. This takes the school administrator away from her other duties and responsibilities, and which may sometimes even have an effect on her emotions. The experiences of these administrators concur with Richard, Triana, and Zhang (2022) observation that school administrators act as 'buffers', absorbing the pressure and responsibilities stemming from problems among teachers, students, parents, supervisors and the community. Some parents could not understand that the administrators needed to listen to both sides before she could take any action, and that she was limited in her reactions by protocol. HT2 explains,

'Some of them expect me to call in the teacher and give her or him a tongue lashing before them. Sometimes it is the parent who is in the wrong, usually because of not knowing the school rules'.

The other theme which emerged was the administrative challenges which administrators faced in the course of their work. Whether the administrator was promoted in the school she had taught, or was transferred to another school, each of the participants experienced difficult teachers on the staff, and this posed a great challenge. HT3 explained her dilemma as follows,

'In administration I believe there is a code of conduct, and then there is the human face. When one is faced with a difficult teacher, you want to hope that he will change with time after being talked to. If he is a good performer, you really do not want to lose him. It is a tricky situation because, on the other hand, you also

fear that he may be a bad influence on others'.

Strategies that could promote female teachers' participation in administrative positions

The participants made several suggestions on what they thought would attract women to school management. The lack of mentoring was a concern raised by the majority of them, in terms of grooming and preparing them for school leadership. Several of them felt that the presence of very few women in school management at the time they had started their careers made it a very foreign idea to them then. HoD9, who works in the same area where she grew up and started her career, says she always imagined that school management was a man's job. She elaborated,

'During the time I went to school as well as the time I started my career, I had only known of one woman primary school head teacher. She headed a town school and she came from another district. Even most of the lady teachers in my primary school taught the lower classes. There was no role-model for us girls. When I went to secondary school, I found a woman head teacher but then I thought that, because it was a girl's school, it had to have a woman as head teacher'.

The existence of role-models and mentors were specifically mentioned as a factor that would help other women to have interest in school management. HoD5 and DHT3 felt that if the women who were already heading schools, and those found at all levels of the education leadership ladder, mentored aspiring women leaders well, the increase in women in school management would be realized.

Studies by Richard, Triana, and Zhang (2022) also support the importance of role-models and mentors for women aspiring for leadership positions.

HT1 noted that most of the times when women school heads talked about their work, they tended to concentrate on the negative aspects, thus discouraging those who would have liked to join. HT1 implored the women school heads to talk about both the positive and negative aspects of the job, so that aspirants may make an informed choice. She insisted that there were positive things about being a head that aspirants should know of. HT1 indicated,

'It's not all doom in this job. Yes, the pay is not good but money is not all. There are good and bad days. Let us talk about them all. As we talk about the difficulties we are facing, let us also mention the satisfaction one gets when your school performs well or when an otherwise naughty child has reformed. Negative talk can be discouraging'.

The importance of management courses in relation to beginning management, was also mentioned, and to on-going continuous professional development. The participants felt that there should be specific courses for women who aspire for school management, as well as further courses where women receive training and get to share school management experiences that are unique to women.

The participants felt that their participation in school management would also be enhanced if women were promoted while taking into account limited geographical movement, in order to ensure that their promotion did not affect their family set-up.

Most of the times when women school heads talked about their work, they tended to concentrate on the negative aspects, thus discouraging those who would have liked to join. This was also noted by Shakeshaft, Brown, Irby, Grogan and Ballenger, (2014) who said that some women heads may be so beset with problems created by resentful teachers who are unwilling to accept a woman 'boss', that the example they provide is unable to mentor and encourage other women. Ongaki, Omwoyo and Musa, (2015) implored the women school heads to talk about both the positive and negative aspects of the job, so that aspirants may

make an informed choice.

The participants felt that their participation in school management would also be enhanced if women were promoted while taking into account limited geographical movement, in order to ensure that their promotion did not affect their family set-up. A woman's culture demands from her that she should stay at home and mind her husband, her children and her home. A husband who allows his wife to leave home, even on promotion, would be frowned upon by the community. The majority of the women administrators thought moving away from home was likely to cause conflict at home, and this makes many women shy away from applying for school leadership. The observation that geographical mobility mattered when women considered entering leadership positions, tallied with the studies discussed in chapter 2.4.5, by Wickham (2007:29), Eddy (2008:56), Mitroussi and Mitroussi (2009:511), and Wanyama (2002:49).

CONCLUSIONS

Women head teachers are found to be supportive and effective leaders and considering the fact that the longest any of the participants had served as a head teacher was ten years. Most women lack self-motivation to join school leadership. However, some proposed strategies to promote women participation was encouraging women to do some management courses and also to have a lot of role-models and mentors, these may play a major role in triggering the women's interest and decision to participate in leadership. The study also revealed that, the transition to leadership is faced by the challenge of a lack of or inadequate preparation for leadership. Prior knowledge of administrative duties plays a role in preparing head teachers for their administrative work. The study found that challenges faced by women school administrators embraced structural and socio-cultural entrenchments in the Zambian society and schools in particular. The study revealed that those stereotypes, cultural perceptions and other barriers these female administrators faced adversely affect their management and influence negatively their work in some ways.

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