

Inclusion of Women in School Management and their Subordinates' Perception: A Case of Masvingo, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The study sought to establish the extent to which women have been mainstreamed in management in educational settings, with specific reference to primary and secondary schools in urban Masvingo, Zimbabwe. Specifically, the study sought to establish the extent to which women were represented, numerically, in management (as heads) as well as how their management was perceived by subordinates. Questionnaires and interviews were used to collect data from 30 respondents (18 female and 12 male) purposefully drawn from five female-headed schools (two high and three primary). The study revealed that females headed five schools in urban Masvingo. Thus there was notable representation of women in school management. It was concluded that the education sector has a gender responsive culture. It was also concluded that gender does not have a bearing on leadership competence as some females were perceived as excelling in leadership. Recommendations were made to the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Gender to encourage women to take up leadership positions by giving them substantive posts and to sensitize society in general that school management is not a male domain.

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Introduction

Gender equity issues have become a predominant concern in contemporary Africa (Greyvenstein, 1996). The 20th century witnessed important societal changes involving women and one of these was increased access to leadership coupled with greater gender equality across all spheres (Bannon & Correia, 2006). Women are now on the agenda worldwide in every field of study and every area of public life (Kesselman, Mcnair, & Schiedewind, 2003). Traditionally, the public sphere has been the domain of men while women were confined to the private domestic sphere. It has often been said by fundamentalists that women are the keepers of the heart and hearth, whereas men are the keepers of the mind and the marketplace (Kesselman, et al

2003). The feminist movement, as epitomized by the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), under the auspices of the Fourth World Conference had empowerment of women as its main agenda. The fundamental goal of the conference was to remove the obstacles to women's active participation in all spheres of public and private life through a full and equal share in decision-making. Thus it sought a realization of shared power and responsibility between women and men at home and in the workplace. The goal is thus an antithesis of patriarchy and at the same time an affirmation of androgyny. Since the Beijing Conference, Southern African Development Community (SADC) has made tremendous progress by putting in place policies that are aimed at empowering women and narrowing the gender gaps in different sectors. The signing of the Gender and Development Declaration by SADC heads of state and government at their 1997 summit in Blantyre, Malawi, is seen as one of the major milestones in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Kethusegile, Kwaramba, & Lopi, 2000). However, in spite of these efforts, customary attitudes and beliefs regarding women's subordinate position still persists today (Tichagwa, 1998). This view is also shared by Macdonald, Sprenger and Dubel (1997) who argue that organizations in both the North and South are not gender-neutral but are gendered in the same way society is gendered: men are dominant in the decision-making arena.

The status of Zimbabwean women has been improving gradually with the introduction of legislation aimed at redressing some of the most gender-based inequalities. The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), to which Zimbabwe is a signatory, enshrines the principle of equality of men and women in terms of their dignity and worth as human beings and in terms of equality in their rights, opportunities and responsibilities (Tomasevki 1993). In response to CEDAW various gender-sensitive laws have been put in place in Zimbabwe to ensure the equal participation of both men and women in leadership responsibilities in all spheres, private and public. The education sector, like all public sectors is called upon to be gender sensitive by incorporating women in educational management as school heads. As such, the idea of an exclusive male power system in the education sector is a social anachronism, at least in principle. It appears that globally, women's leadership is now accepted as an inevitable phenomenon in view of such conventions as CEDAW. Since the inclusion of women in leadership is the global in-thing, the present study sought to establish whether women were well-represented in school management and perceptions of such leadership. Since urban society in general is thought to be more flexible in adjusting to social

changes compared to its rural counterpart (Chalfant & LaBeff, 1988) the study sought to establish the validity of this assertion. Considering that Masvingo is within the general context of patriarchy, the study sought to find out whether women leaders were bogged down by patriarchal assumptions in their execution of duty. The quantitative and qualitative dimensions of women's management were considered to establish numerical representation of women as well as subordinates' perceptions of the management. The study sought to address the following questions: Does school management in urban Masvingo reflect gender sensitivity? If so, are women in management perceived as competent leaders?

Method

Sample: The study involved respondents from female-headed schools because the intention was to establish perceptions of the management of female heads, which would assist the researcher to draw inferences about the qualitative aspect of the inclusion of females in school management. Convenience sampling procedure was used to select respondents (18 female and 12 male). Each participant was provided with an informed consent form assuring them confidentiality and anonymity. They were informed that participation to the study was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Six participants (teachers) were drawn from each of the 5 female-headed schools. All participants signed and returned the consent form to the researcher.

Instruments: Questionnaires and interviews were used to gather information. The instruments were adopted because of their complementarity. The questionnaire consisted of open ended questions to allow respondents to express their views freely. Twenty participants responded to the questionnaire while 10 participated on a one on one interview using the same instrument.

Procedure: The data was collected in September, 2009. The researcher went personally to the different schools to arrange for interviews and completion of questionnaires by participants. Permission to conduct the study was granted by heads of different schools who introduced the researcher to the senior teacher or mistress who in turn introduced her to members of staff who had worked under the respective school heads for at least a term. Appointments were made with individual teachers for interviews that were conducted at times and places that were convenient for the individual participants. Some participants opted to be interviewed in the comfort of their homes. Data collected during interviews was paraphrased as interviews progressed. For the sake

of convenience, data collected through interviews and questionnaires was categorized and then analyzed in the light of trends that emerged.

Results and Discussion

Numerical representation of women in school management

The study revealed that two out of the six high schools and three out of the 10 primary schools considered in the study were headed by females. All in all, out of the 16 schools under consideration in urban Masvingo, five were headed by females and the rest were headed by males. In spite of the fact that the majority of heads in the schools under consideration were males, the results reflect a reconfiguration of school administration; a triumph of inclusion over exclusion because traditionally was the prerogative of males. The movement advocating greater gender equality across all spheres (Bannon & Correia 2006) has been embraced by Masvingo urban, Zimbabwe. The involvement of women in educational management is one indicator of the advancement of women not only in Zimbabwe but also in Africa.

It is clear from the study that things are changing for the better. Male leadership in schools is no longer the norm. The participation of women in educational management confirms Haralambos, Holborn and Heald's (2004) view that women have made significant strides in many areas of life. Traditional gender role stereotypes have been challenged. The numerical representation of women in educational management indicates a new tendency toward an androgynous philosophy, in which a sharing of traditional roles is apparent. From the findings, it can be inferred that there is growing acceptance, in the secular society, of women's leadership. While the religious sector generally ascribes to women secondary status (Ritchie, 2001), the secular society, as epitomized by the education sector, has taken heed to calls for gender equity by giving leadership opportunities to women. However, the study shows that while there is acceptance of female leadership, the full realization of gender equality in educational management is yet to be accomplished. Patriarchal assumptions still dominate the social terrain in spite of measures being taken by government to put an end to discrimination against women.

In view of the fact that normally the school climate is shaped by the school head, the figure at the helm of an institution, who 'runs its nuts and bolts,' qualitative aspects of female leadership were analyzed on the basis of perceptions of subordinates. Perceptions were considered in light of the following aspects:

- Decision-making

- Accessibility to staff and students
- Supervision of personnel

Perceptions of the management of female heads

The leadership of women was seen in an ambivalent light by respondents, both male and female. While on the one hand females were depicted as competent leaders and in some cases even more competent than males, on the other hand they were depicted as incompetent with management being seen as the domain of the males.

Decision making: Of the five female heads in the study, two (with substantive posts) were largely depicted as highly competent while the rest were considered incompetent on decision making. Competence from the perception of respondents constituted ability to make the right decisions that had the effect of enhancing the organization's capacity to achieve its goals, being assertive, bold, objective, being in total control, consultative, and flexible where need arose. According to most respondents the competent female leaders were not affected in any way by their gender. They were capable of making independent but informed decisions. They were also said to be flexible at times in terms of implementation of Ministry of Education regulations, thus having a contingency approach when necessary. They were guided by both the spirit of the letter (regulations) and the spirit of the reality on the ground. While the leaders were said to be consultative, they were also deemed to be dictatorial at times to make things move. Such leaders were also depicted as defiant to gender stereotyping as their leadership was considered manly. Furthermore, prevailing socio-cultural attitudes which are behind the belief that decision making is the domain of men are being challenged by such leaders. However, it also emerged that in spite of their scoring high on the decision making index, the female heads rated as competent had their own weaknesses. The recurring weakness was that they tended to keep grudges.

The females who were perceived as incompetent in decision-making were said to lack self-confidence, and often relied on informal sources and selected advisors. It was also alleged that these female leaders were not capable of making independent decisions to the extent that they would consult their husbands even after staff meetings were conducted and certain decisions had been made. They would come back to their staff saying they had had a second thought resulting in overturning the original decisions. On why this could be the case, respondents generally

indicated that such leaders were still being influenced by the patriarchal culture which made them think that males are the ideal leaders and that since they have been socialized to believe that the husband is the head and therefore the legitimate decision maker, they feel that failure to consult their husbands might result in making faulty decisions which might deprive them of their husbands' support in the event that problems arose owing to such decisions. Furthermore, the female leaders rated as incompetent were said to have more confidence in the advice given by males and were often likely to respect the contributions of male staff members than those of female members of staff, creating animosity between themselves and female members in some cases. Owing to lack of self-confidence, such leaders had a tendency to be lethargic, impervious to new ideas and to rigidly stick to written regulations from the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture without exercising their discretion. Considering that these female leaders were in an acting capacity, it could be inferred that lack of confidence and lack of flexibility owed to the lack of substantive authority. It is generally held that leaders operating in an acting capacity are not confident as they can be stripped of the powers any time. Operating in an acting capacity was thus conceived of as an impediment to independent decision-making.

Some respondents, mostly female, even questioned why females are given leadership posts since this is the domain of males. This perception is supportive of Greyvenstein's (1996) view that the deeply entrenched stereotyped view of women as inferior to men appears to remain at the core of modern society. This was evidence of patriarchal socialization. Generally males perceived female heads in a more positive light than females. This could be explained in terms of female heads generally showing more confidence in males as was shown in the study. Results seem consistent with Tichagwa's (1999) view on the persistence of a patriarchal culture.

Accessibility: All female heads were generally said to be accessible to members of staff as well as to students. Furthermore, they were said to show some favoritism in their treatment of staff to some degree. However, while two of the heads were said to have mild favoritism, three were said to have severe favoritism. They (those with severe favoritism) tended to have an 'inner circle' of members to whom they would give certain favors and have personal vendettas against some members of staff to the extent that even if these members did some good things the heads would not show appreciation. This has resulted in the demoralization of some members leading to their transfers. Such leaders were also said to be failures in inculcating discipline especially among secondary school students. The two female heads labeled as showing mild favoritism in their

treatment of staff and students were also said to have a certain aura/mystique of authority that made them to command respect from both teachers and students. It was also suggested that such leaders were recruited on the basis of their merit and not their gender.

Supervision of personnel: While all the five female heads were said to be thorough in terms of supervision of written records, three were alleged to be incompetent in supervision as they were said to lack flexibility in terms of implementation of requirements by the Ministry of Education. The Ministry has certain minimum requirements in terms of documentation and the three female heads designated as incompetent were said to stick to regulations rigidly in spite of conditions that would have made it difficult to implement the regulations. The study revealed that subordinates resent leaders who are too strict and that such subordinates tended to rebel against heads. Competent female leaders were said to be flexible in this regard. As a plus to them, respondents noted that competent female leaders rewarded good performers, especially females, by for example giving them posts of responsibility. In terms of distribution of posts of responsibility, generally, there was gender sensitivity in all schools under investigation. However, one female secondary school head was accused of favoring males by giving them posts of Heads of Departments, sometimes sidelining females who were more experienced and better qualified than them. This unfairness in distribution of posts of responsibility was often paralleled by unjust supervision practices whereby some teachers were told in advance that they would be assessed in their classes while others were ambushed. Such supervisory practices tended to be aimed at fault-finding than at developing the teachers concerned. This tended to thwart the team spirit and at the same time encourage cheating. While disparities were noted among the so-called competent and incompetent female administrators, a common element noted was a tendency to hold grudges with some teachers but this was more pronounced among those labeled as incompetent.

Notwithstanding that some conflicts do arise, some female heads were capable of managing conflict. In some female-headed schools, the school climate was characterized by a business-like spirit, yet friendly and supportive. The fact that two out of the five female heads were rated as competent is an indication that gender is not a key determinant of leadership competence.

Conclusion

Female leaders who are competent excel in managing schools while the incompetent were thought to be weak. Gender does not have a bearing on competence in leadership. Some women

in this study exceed men in terms of effectiveness as leaders. While traditional gender stereotyping has relegated women to a secondary position in society, the study has revealed a change of human heart and mind where women are recognized as equal to men in terms of leadership capacity. Thus women have been mainstreamed in educational management in both quantitative and qualitative terms. In spite of the inclusion of women in school management, a patriarchal culture still persists considering that a majority of heads in the area under investigation were males and that a majority of female heads were rated as weak.

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