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## CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE PRINCIPALS THROUGH SOCIAL ROLE THEORY: CASE STUDY OF BARBERTON PRIMARY SCHOOLS, MPUMALANGA, SOUTH AFRICA

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### Abstract

Women who manage schools encounter numerous hurdles according to a wealth of empirical data from school leadership research. The objective of this study was to examine the experiences of female principals in their position and the strategies they use to deal with these obstacles in some schools in Umjidi district, Barberton Circuit in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. A qualitative research approach was employed, and purposive sampling was used to collect data. Data were collected through semi-structured, online interviews with four female school principals in the Barberton area and these were analyzed thematically. The social role theory was used as a theoretical framework. Gender stereotypes are stereotypes that people believe about men and women. The findings indicated that female principals in the Barberton still experiences barriers such as gender discrimination, gender inequality, stereotyping and resistance from communities, school discipline, staff and parents displaying negative attitudes, and insubordination by male staff. This shows that the barriers of sexism – social, ethnic and cultural stereotyping; and glass ceilings and glass walls – still exist in the education sector. The study recommends the mounting of gender awareness workshops with both parents and educators to educate them on gender equity issues.

*Keywords:* female principals; experiences; gender discrimination; gender inequality; glass ceilings; mentoring; networking; stereotyping; South Africa

### Introduction

Gender inequality in leadership has been the central focus of studies in the field of educational administration for many years (Arar, 2018; Potvin et al., 2018). History has it that leadership roles were generally held by men (Day, 2014; Longman & Anderson, 2016; Merchant, 2012). This social attitude or 'injustice' seems to have made women reluctant to pursue administrative leadership positions (Anewu, 2010). According to Msila (2013), women in leadership do not always have the necessary community support, and they frequently have to demonstrate their leadership skills in a patriarchal society under challenging circumstances. There is a wealth of literature that demonstrates how various variables, such as tradition and culture, contribute to the lack of trust in women in leadership roles (Cundiff & Vescio, 2016; Msila, 2013; Morley & Crossouard, 2016). Lumby

(2010) also contends that communities do not trust women to be appointed as school managers because they believe that men alone can handle the seriousness required for such an important position. The aim of this study was to investigate experiences female principals face in the day -to-day running of their schools in one rural district in South Africa.

## Literature Review

Literature generally shows that women are underrepresented in management positions in both the schooling system and in higher education (Austin, 2016; Hannum et al., 2015; Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Shava & Ndebele, 2014). Women are often expected to stay at home instead of taking up roles previously dominated by men, such as school management. At each step of administrative preparation, job seeking and selection, there are organisational processes that clearly indicate a preference for men (Hill et al., 2016; Hora, 2014; Lunyolo et al., 2014). Stereotypical assumptions about the gender differences between men and women make conditions difficult for women to obtain the opportunity to be placed in senior leadership positions (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Morley & Crossouard, 2016). According to Drake and Owen (1998), in Indonesia, women executives experienced obstacles in the environment and stereotyping about gender roles which typecast them into nurturing, supporting types of jobs. There seems to be a patriarchal male culture of dominance and many schools tend to be saturated with masculine values (Bush & West-Burnham, 1994; Davis & Maldonado, 2015). The domination of men leads to discrimination against women (Shakeshaft, 1993). Some men assume that certain gender roles are natural and normal (Hill et al., 2016), while women are subjected to a patriarchal culture where most of the responsibilities belong to men (Bush & West-Burnham, 1994; Cundiff & Vescio, 2016; Gill & Arnold, 2015). As Hill et al. (2016) show, whereas men are socialised to be confident, assertive, and self-promoting, cultural attitudes toward women as leaders continue to suggest to women that it is often inappropriate or undesirable to possess those characteristics.

This underrepresentation can also be seen in other organisation apart from the school. According to United States Bureau of Labour Statistics (2011), women occupy mere 3.8% of Fortune 500 chief executive officer seats and represent only 3.2% of the heads of boards in the largest companies of the European Union. The number are only slightly better in the political sector where in 2012, women only held 90 of the 535 seats (16.8%) in the U.S Congress (Center for American Women and Politics, 2012) and 19.1% of parliamentary seats globally (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2012).

South Africa has emerged from a socio-political order that was characterised by discrimination against and neglect of women. The new South African constitution has gone a long way towards ending this state of affairs. For example, according to Section 9 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act No. 108 of 1996), all South Africans are equal before the law. Nonetheless, women continue to be a minority in educational leadership positions. Despite regulatory attempts that prioritise gender parity, sexism and stereotyping continue to propagate the notion of women's submissiveness and continue to be a difficult hurdle for aspiring female leaders. (Mestry & Schmidt, 2012).

Women leaders in South Africa are still far from reaching equality in the workplace, despite today's progressive changes (Msila, 2013). While many argue that the status of women in the workplace is slowly changing, but the change is slow, sometimes even women may internalize that they are not ready for leadership and management positions. (Msila, 2013). After reviewing literature related to South Africa, Greyling and Steyn (2015) concluded that research shows an underrepresentation of women in management positions at all levels of the education system, including primary schools, high school, universities and other educational institutions.

Female school leaders continue to struggle with gender-based racism, isolation, exclusion from informal networks and systemic discrimination. Furthermore, women in leadership roles in the field of education have to deal with internal and external pressures and peer scrutiny and criticism from others (Jean-Marie et al., 2009). The tradition and culture of mistrust of female leadership have led to women having to prove that they are capable of leading – sometimes under the trying conditions of a patriarchal society (Msila, 2013). According to Diko (2014), there are strong cultural expectations about women who enter school leadership because of a gender-stereotyping syndrome in society.

Women are seen primarily as teachers rather than school leaders, and when they do become school leaders, they face many bystanders and critics, and are often marginalized and subject to intense scrutiny (Jean-Marie & Martinez, 2007). Searby et al. (2015) contended that female principals find themselves having to piece together help for themselves and are rarely able to draw on help from mentors and coaches. Principalship is thus a lonely territory for them.

In most countries, women have to break through the glass ceiling before they can rise to high positions inside and outside the organisations. When women take leadership positions in schools, they suffer from institutional racism, sexism, men failing to submit to their authority, pull-her-down syndrome, gossip, and resistance from staff

varying from defiance to subtle non-compliance, the school management team distancing itself from decisions made during management meetings and mistrust from parents (Msila, 2013; Naidoo & Perumal, 2014).

Other studies have highlighted how women can sometimes be a barrier to themselves. Lumby (2010) studied how female principals approach stereotyping and found that some women lack self-esteem, which may result in imposed traditional male dominance, a lack of self-confidence and a fear of failure.

Female principals need to thrive and survive obstacles to prove they are capable of leading and succeeding. Women can break barriers, shun the preconceived expectations of failure and climb to greater heights of being effective school leaders (Searby et al., 2015). The paucity of women in management, therefore, suggests acute gender misrepresentation in leadership. It is important to research experiences of female leaders as these experiences might be detrimental to their performance. As Mollé and Tshabangu, (2014) show, female leadership is perceived less favourably and therefore an investigation into the barriers they encounter in their day to running of schools may shed light on why this is the case. This study sought to investigate the experiences faced by female principals of primary schools in one rural district in South Africa in order to advance recommendations to mitigate the challenges.

## Theoretical Framework

The social role theory of Eagly (1970) underpins this research. Eagly is a social psychologist who has spent most of her career studying gender differences. According to the Social Role Theory of Gender Disparities, men and women are physically different, resulting in a division of labour in society (Eagly, 2012; Wood & Eagly, 1970).

In Eagly's view, these intrinsic distinctions contribute to the development of men's and women's gender roles. Gender roles are characteristics of a person's gender. Being a woman indicates having limited powers in comparison to men, who are perceived to possess abilities that women, regardless of their location, do not. According to the concept, certain behaviours needed of men and women are socially and culturally distinct. Historically, women were expected to be the main caregivers for their children, while men were expected to be the family's breadwinners (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

These expectations, according to Eagly's view, emerged as a result of intrinsic male-female disparities. Gender stereotypes are societal and cultural assumptions about how men and women should behave. The societal role stereotypes of "women taking care and men taking command" have a pervasive and long-lasting effect on prejudiced judgement of women in leadership positions (Hoyt & Burnette, 2013, p.8). Social and cultural expectations, as well as gender stereotypes, all contribute to the idea that certain professions are reserved for men and others for women. Additionally, they contribute to the idea that men are more capable of problem-solving and making sound decisions than women. This may explain why men continue to predominate in rural traditional courts, where they wield authority when resolving communal conflicts or making decisions. As a result, women are viewed as poor conflict managers and are excluded from appearing before such tribunals. Consequently, women who become school administrators are viewed as having achieved positions they were not intended to hold and may be unable to manage or make decisions at their schools.

Women are expected to exhibit community characteristics such as helpfulness, kindness, sympathy, understanding, and compassion, whereas men are expected to be agentic; that is, self-sufficient, masterful and capable. These role expectations are said to derive from society's allocation of men and women into unique social roles – notably, the assignment of child-rearing and other household labour to women, as well as men and women's proclivity for pursuing different types of paid work (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Mthethwa et al., 2019). Teachers, nurses, and social workers are all examples of community responsibilities that are usually regarded as female occupations. This is a normal progression from motherhood to another position centred on the caregiving function, according to social role theory. On the other hand, men are considered to be the financial providers and work outside the family. This way of thinking results in individuals' work and career expectations being gender-specific (Gallagher, 2017).

Additionally, cultural and societal conventions establish a distinction between male and female responsibilities, according to social role theory (Wood & Eagly, 2012; Mthethwa et al., 2019). According to the gender bias perspective, which is founded on social role theory (Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Eagly & Wood, 2012), there are discrepancies in role occupancy within society and family, and occupations establish role expectations for each gender. This mindset persists in some circles, where members believe women are incapable of being successful leaders. Stereotypes of men and women are pervasive and easily activated in social situations (Brands & Kilduff,

2013; Mthethwa et al., 2019). Each individual who joins the team from a social setting brings with them preconceived notions about gender roles. Individuals, on the other hand, differ in their frequency of stereotyping women (Mthethwa et. al, 2019). Not only can stereotypes influence attributions, but also the behaviour of targets. The social role theory underpins this research, which contends that women in leadership roles face gender stereotypes and bias. Gender prejudices exist regardless of the woman's talents.

## Methodology

The qualitative research method was employed, in order to address the aim and objectives of the research – i.e., to gain a deeper and more detailed understanding of the experiences of female principals when leading schools, and how they deal with obstacles they face. A sample of four female principals located in the Barberton circuit was purposively selected. Ethical clearance approval was obtained from the University. Then a letter was obtained from the Department of Basic Education granting permission to conduct the research. Data was collected online via Microsoft Teams interviews with the principals. Interviews were recorded with an audio recorder for transcription and analysis.

Participants were issued with consent letters explaining their rights and the voluntary options available pertaining to the interview process. The interviewees had to sign the consent form to indicate they understood the nature of the research project and the content, and that they were willing to participate in the research.

Interview sessions lasted 20-30 minutes and covered each topic in detail. Qualitative, open-ended interview questions afforded respondents the opportunity to describe their experiences in their own words and gave researchers the flexibility to ask what, how, when, where, and why. Thematic analysis was used to identify the major themes and common issues (Patton, 2015). Data analysis involves coding and indexing data, focusing on different categories, and identifying and explaining themes and patterns from the participant's perspective (Chenail, 2012). These themes and patterns are then explained and understood as they emerge from the setting. Data analysis is a continuous process that involves reflecting on the data, asking analytical questions, and writing memoranda as the study progresses.

## Findings and Discussions

### Receipt of female principals by educators at schools

There was a question which sought to find out how female principals were received by both male and female educators at schools. Female principals reported that other staff members at the schools did not treat them well. Three out of four female principals indicated that their receipt by teachers was negative and an element of doubt and lack of trust was evident from among some SMT members. They indicated that fellow staff at the schools were not pleased, partially welcomed them and there was an element of doubt. In this regard, principals P1, P3 and P4 said:

*P1: It was not easy for educators to accept me as their leader. Most male educators where not pleased because of their cultural belief that a man is a head everywhere.*

*P3: At first teachers and parents were not friendly. They hardly received me as a new female principal. They were reluctant to receive me as their leader.*

*P4: Negative tradition and culture loyalists do not take women as individuals who could take decision and lead the majority.*

### Gender stereotyping and discrimination

Diko (2014) stated that due to a gender stereotyping syndrome in society, there are significant cultural expectations concerning women who lead schools. This was consistent with the study's findings that parents rejected the principal's counsel because she was a female. According to Msila (2013), strong cultural norms about women entering positions of leadership in schools had a negative impact on female principals. One respondent discovered that she was first rejected by the community as the principal of the school because they preferred a male principal. The respondent went on to say that the community didn't think a female principal could ever be

strong because she wouldn't understand the community. The difficulties that female leaders encounter are significantly influenced by societal beliefs. (Maseko, 2013).

Msila (2013) discovered that women were perceived as being less serious, more motherly, and unable to handle difficulties and obstacles. This demonstrated the persistence of the notion that women make poor leaders as Mestry and Schmidt (2012) commented that discrimination, prejudice and stereotyping continued to perpetuate the myth of female submissiveness – so clouding their performance and potential. However according to Wolle (2023) female principals perform much better than their male counterparts in four out of the five key functions of a principal. According to Kanjere (2011), traditional and tribal leaders frequently held the view that only men should hold positions of authority. According to Diko (2014), women continue to suffer social resistance and are ignored in respect to their constitutionally guaranteed right to equality despite government legislation and programs that enlighten and provide direction on gender equity. As confirmation of these findings, Msila (2013) citing Grant (2005), stated that women in some communities in South Africa still had little or no credibility as leaders. Some of the respondents were, however, fortunate to be supported by their communities.

*“I have a very good and supportive community... I attend the community meetings... I work with them and communicate with them.” (P1)*

### **Dealing with male parents and community members**

Findings also revealed that female principals had to deal with parents' grievances, especially fathers. Three of the female principals interviewed complained that fathers were not always easy to deal with, and whenever they came to school, they preferred to discuss issues with another male figure rather than talk to a female principal.

*P1: “Some of the male parents when visiting the school prefer to talk to another male figure even if it can be a teacher than expressing themselves to me... I granted them permission to have their discussions with the male figure knowing that when they have finalised their discussions, they will come to the office for the final decisions to be taken.”*

Most school principals are male, even though women perform better in leadership roles, whether on purpose or accidentally. This has a negative impact on the effectiveness of the schools and means that they make less of a contribution to national development (Wolle, 2023).

### **School discipline**

According to Makhaye (2012), female principals expressed concerns about the overall conduct of pupils, particularly male learners, in her study. Male pupils are known to be uncooperative in general. They are confrontational, threatening and undermining of female leaders' potential. This was confirmed by one of the female principals.

*P4: “With the learners, especially the male learners, sometimes it comes a challenge because some of the parents when you call them to school so that you can sit down as adults in order to reach a consensus, they never come.”*

When asked about their encounters with male teachers, female principals indicated that some male teachers were not cooperative, did not want to take instructions and undermined them. For example, P1 and P2 had this to say:

*P1: “Male teachers are not cooperative. Some when you gave them work, they just do it in their own pace. Some are too fast to take the decision they don't listen to the problem they just act before thinking.”*

*P2: “Some want to challenge you, but after a while they cooperative as they want to see or improve your performance.”*

One principal, however, felt that some male teachers were not a problem at all and were very cooperative.

*P3: “Some are very respectful and willing to help while others are always ready for confrontation and always fault-finding.”*

Regarding the general behaviour of teachers (both men and women) towards female principals, the principals indicated that the general behaviour was negative as there was an element of undermining and disrespect towards them.

Findings of the study showed that female principals were perceived as incompetent and incapable not only by male colleagues but also by female staff members. Given that they all have the same characteristic—being female—female coworkers could be expected to favor female supervisors, but this is not the case. P1 reaffirmed

this by claiming that she had encountered some unfavorable behavior from her female professors who formed groups and attempted to minimize her.

*P1: "They will try and sabotage school activities such as not attending meetings but as time goes on, I would call them one-on-one and have a pep talk with them to find out the problem and solve it immediately, so we can proceed with our job."*

*P2: the female teachers usually form their own clusters and try to 'pull you down', but what matters is how you handle them.*

According to Sánchez-Moreno, López-Yáñez, and Toussaint-Banville,(2023) All female should advocate a critical and feminist leadership that leads to fighting for equality for all the members of the educational community, understanding equality as opposed to inequality, not to difference.

## Conclusion

The study found that female principals of primary schools in the Barberton Circuit of Ehlazeni District Mpumalanga Province faced similar constraints in their professional role as school principals. The findings indicated that, despite post-1994 developments in South Africa, South African women, in this case those from Barberton Circuit in Ehlazeni District, continued to face numerous barriers in managing their schools. Based on the findings of the study, it can also be concluded that female heads are not well received by other staff members at the schools, with the majority of the staff members expressing an element of doubt in female school managers' ability to lead.

Female heads themselves indicated that male dominance was an entrenched culture among male staff members in general. However, as the review of literature has shown, the effect of culture and tradition, wherein women are acculturated to believe that they are inferior to and have to bow down to men could have impacted on how female educators viewed female school heads. The investigation also found that female principals in Barberton continued to face hurdles such as gender inequality, discrimination, gender-based stereotyping, negative attitudes from teachers, particularly female teachers, problems with male parents and dealing with challenging learners and teachers. The study recommends the mounting of gender awareness workshops with both parents and educators to educate them on gender equity issues and female teachers to be mentored by their respective school leaders.

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