Perceived Impact of Culture on the Progress of Women as School Leaders in South Africa

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Abstract

The advancement of women as leaders in socio-economic and political sectors remains a challenge worldwide. In the South African education sector, although the low participation of women in leadership positions is well acknowledged, there lacks a clear and detailed explanation of the challenges of this reality. Drawing from in-depth interviews conducted with 52 participants across the Gauteng Province Department of Education, an exploratory research design was adopted in this article to explore how culture serves as one of the basic challenges faced by aspiring women leaders. The study found that cultural norms and beliefs made women's leadership difficult and served as a gatekeeper to their ascendency to leadership positions. Culture sustains patriarchal tendencies and stereotypes that continue to be barriers to women leaders and aspiring women leaders. The study proposes the roll-out of transformational leadership at the departmental level to mobilise the promotion of female leaders within schools.

Keywords: Culture, education, patriarchy, schools, stereotypes, women leadership

Introduction

The advancement of women as leaders in socio-economic and political sectors remains a challenge worldwide (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Choudhry et al., 2019; Darong & Menggo, 2021). It is widely observed globally that socially-motivated injustices continue to compromise how women engage the broader society and its political economy of power and resource access, ownership, and utilisation; hence, even in workplaces, women continue to be considered inferior (Mosese & Mearns, 2016). In several nations, women are considered inferior both within the household and the workplace (Adams-Prassl et al., 2020; Amirault, 2019). As a result, women are often discriminated against in decision-making and employment opportunities. In some cultures, women are even viewed as part of the property to be inherited when the husband dies (Makombe, 2006). In patriarchal societies, men are household heads, while women act as deputies. In this setup, women cannot make any decisions without the consent of men. A husband can also decide whether the wife should be employed or not. The husband can also decide whether they need their daughters to attend school. According to Khurshid (2016), male children also tend to occupy a better rank than grown-up women within the household and can even make decisions when the father is away or requires them to do so. In the case of the father's death, sons automatically become the heirs (Kele & Pietersen, 2015). Thus, human rights frameworks seek to abolish these kinds of situations so that both genders in society can enjoy equivalent opportunities to ensure inclusive development (Nkenkana, 2018).

South Africa has been no exception. During colonialism and independence, women faced various barriers in their bid to ascend to leadership positions (Maseko, 2013; Mokoena, 2018). In recognition of the plight of women

professionals who failed to ascend to leadership positions, one of the focuses of the post-apartheid administration has been to ensure a non-cultural, non-racial, non-sexist and, of course, non-cultural society (The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). The democracy attained at political independence in 1994 by South Africa was anticipated to usher in opportunities for employment equity and empowerment for all, irrespective of the citizens' race or gender. Among the major beneficiaries were supposed to be the previously disadvantaged population categories, including women, as they were the ones most affected by both culture and the religions brought about by colonialism. However, despite the commitment and ambition of the new government to improve the plight of women in South Africa, such as by allowing them to own property and implementing the Employment Equity Act, the position of women in leadership remains a matter of concern. Women remain invisible in leadership and decision-making positions across sectors, including education (Zitha, 2022).

Many studies have problematised the neglecting of women from positions of leadership in South Africa (Crafford, 2015; Makombe, 2006; Mosese & Mearns, 2016; Nienaber & Moraka, 2016; Sebola & Tsheola, 2014). Studies that revealed women in leadership focused on lobbying women to ascend to high-profile political positions and major international corporations (Bangani & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2020; du Toit & Lekoloane, 2018; Habib & Habib, 2020). However, there appears to be limited attention to the study of the same issues in the education sector context. Available studies on the education sector exist mainly as grey literature in the form of student papers (Makombe, 2006; Naidoo, 2020; Nhlapo, 2019; Zitha, 2022) and conference proceedings (Oosthuizen, 2018; Sebola & Tsheola, 2014). As a result, it seems there is limited understanding of the various factors that pose challenges for women leaders seeking to ascend to leadership positions within South African schools. Although some of these studies identify culture as one of the barriers (Zitha, 2022; Khurshid, 2016), they do not provide satisfactory solutions as to how culture, as one of the challenges for women leaders, should be resolved. Thus, this article (i) explores how culture is perceived to have impact on aspiring women leaders in the Gauteng Province schools, and; (ii) proposes potential solutions in dealing with the challenges faced by women leaders due to culture.

This study has much potential to increase scholarly and policy attention on the plight of women within the South African education sector. It could also highlight potential avenues through which women could be empowered to ascend to leadership positions within schools as part of the empowerment and gender equality process. The study will also contribute to the knowledge of school management in South Africa. More significantly, the study brings to attention the various generic qualities of women, namely; gentleness, sensitivity, empathy, caring, sweetness, tolerance, deference and affection, and many others, and demonstrates how these qualities could make a marked contribution in school management. Scholars could make use of the insights raised in the study to explore further the intertwining issues of gender, feminism and school management.

The article is organised as follows: The next section presents the conceptual framework and reviews various discourses related to the study, followed by an outline of the research methods adopted. Thereafter, the findings of the study are presented and discussed. Lastly, a model is proposed, and conclusions are drawn from the findings and discussion.

Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

This study draws from the theory of feminism. This theory first emerged in response to societal gender discrimination against women whose rights were not considered compared to men's (Feminism theory emerged in the West (Kaymaz & Ünsal, 2022). Smith (2019) defines feminism as the belief in social, political, and economic equality between men and women. The theory criticises societal circumscribed conventions that categorise individuals into males and females, and subsequently allocate roles based on gender. Feminism is a movement that raises awareness of inequality and discrimination between genders. It advocates for societal transformation in favour of women (Amirault, 2019; Nienaber & Moraka, 2016). Social circumscribed conventions steeped in cultural structures have reserved leadership roles across socio-economic sectors for men.

In contrast, women have been reduced to the role of assisting men. Thus, feminism seeks to change how women are treated in the household and workplace. Feminism, under its various branches, exposes how culture promotes power inequality between men and women. This inequality is observed in politics and workplaces, including institutions of learning where men remain dominant leaders. Since men are culturally regarded as natural leaders, they have first-hand control over economic activities, as well as the leadership of schools. In this case, there has been a significant underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in schools (Nienaber & Moraka, 2016; Vial, Naper & Brescoll, 2016; Zitha, 2022).

The challenges women face in ascending to leadership positions within institutions are linked to societal, cultural structures (Nienaber & Moraka, 2016). Culture is described as a way of life that deals with beliefs,

concepts, habits, behaviour, principles, and everything people learn to do (Darong & Menngo, 2021). Cultural practices are passed down from generation to generation. In most cultures, leadership roles are primarily assigned to men, while women are meant to support them as a result of cultural beliefs. For instance, in most African cultures, it is the responsibility of men to take care of women (Frirtz & Knippenberg, 2017). Women are barred from making decisions without men's permission (Carli & Eagly, 2016). Within the household unit, male children occupy a better rank than grown-up women and can even make decisions when the father is away (Xie & Pang, 2018). These cultural norms also extend to most workplaces where men are made to continue dominating.

Culture gave birth to patriarchy – a system that has put men in leadership and superior societal positions, subjecting women to act as their subordinates (Tong, 2018). According to Shava, Tlou and Mpofu (2019), patriarchy is a system of power and inequality favouring men in society. It signifies power differences between men and women, where women are victims while men are unnamed perpetrators (Robertson, Selva & Nielsen, 2021). Under patriarchal arrangements, men and women perform specific roles and responsibilities based on gender (Ndhlovu & Tembo, 2020). These roles are not biological; people are socialised into them (Naidoo, 2020). The roles and responsibilities have evolved over the years, and society admits them as natural (Mbilinyi, 2016). Due to patriarchy, society continues to believe that women are not suitable enough to take leadership roles. This has become a culture for many centuries.

When the Coronavirus pandemic broke out in 2019, the exposed cultural and patriarchal realities primarily affected women worldwide. For instance, Barua (2022) explains that the percentage of working women dropped drastically during the lockdown compared to men. Barua (2022) reveals that in the US, Canada and South Africa, female employment dropped by 17.9%, 13% and 2.,8% compared to males' 13.9, 11% and 18.9%, respectively. The main cause for the vast drop in women's employment than men was that when movements were restricted due to lockdowns, many businesses turned to remote work, and women generally were to culturally assume greater house responsibilities than males.

Literature shows that although South Africa is a signatory to several international treaties and has adopted its own frameworks on gender equality, the country has not made significant progress in realising gender equality (Nkenkana, 2018; Oosthuizen, 2018; Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2018a). Statistically, it is reported that in 2016, only 39.2% of women in South Africa held seats in provincial parliaments. The percentage of women in managerial positions was 31.1% in 2014, 30.8% in 2015, 32.1% in 2016, and 32.1% in 2017 (Stats SA, 2021). Therefore, the realisation of gender equality remains a primary challenge in schools and across all government institutions and structures. Habib and Habib (2020) found that in South Africa, women were stuck at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy. Habib and Habib (2020) aver that despite the Constitutional guarantees on full and equal enjoyment of rights of all genders and strides in women's empowerment and gender equality, many women in South Africa still suffer inequality, discrimination, sexism, patriarchy, and institutionalised inequality.

Furthermore, the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) released a report which highlighted that "women mostly occupy lower levels where earnings and power to influence decisions are equally less" (2018, cited in Nhlapo & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2016:171-172). While the inclusion of women in the lower levels of management will eventually enable them to compete for jobs at the entry-level, it does not guarantee their appointment. In fact, these women will need to wait longer for a vacancy for them to be promoted. As a result, they are stuck in the lower levels of management for long durations. Where this occurs, the efforts and discourse on gender equality and empowerment do not bear fruits. For instance, in 2017, a report by the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) revealed that in 2016, around 16% of the total complaints received had something to do with violating the right to equality in employment promotion within institutions. Such violations undermined the aims of the Employment Equity Act (EEA) No. 55 of 1998, which seeks to promote and protect gender equality within institutions through transformation. The EEA No. 55 of 1998 requires that issues of gender equality be taken into account in job promotions and the formation of organisational leadership structures (Republic of South Africa, 1998).

Discrimination and underrepresentation of women in South African workplaces are linked to the country's cultures, traditional beliefs, and colonial and apartheid history (Nhlapo, 2019; Nkenkana, 2018; Oosthuizen, 2018). Mokoena (2018) avers that since 1994 when the country gained its independence, only a few women have experienced workplace growth. Only a few women gained entrance to managerial roles, while a few others have assumed positions in which they perform technical roles. The rest of the women remain underrepresented, especially at management levels. According to Mosese and Mearns (2016), the underrepresentation of women within places of work was at its worst in 1995, when the country was emerging from a century of colonial rule and decades of apartheid. The presence of women, not only in workplaces but also in leadership positions, only began to be noticed between 1996 and 2000 (Maseko, 2013). However, even though there began to be increased women's presence in workplaces, the number of men assuming leadership positions soared significantly, making

the percentage of women in leadership positions insignificant. According to Mokoena (2018), this situation has still not changed on an outright basis even though in 2005, after the adoption of the SFGE, South African institutions witnessed an upturn of women from 30% in 2005 and 40% in 2014; this increase remains below the country's 50% target.

Moreover, the data released by the DPSA (2018) show that various government departments have also lost interest in dealing with equality issues as they now focus on other urgent issues. The ascendency of women to senior management has continued at an average of 1%, with no signs of efforts to deal with the situation (DPSA, 2018). This shows that, if anything, the 50% target can only be reached by 2025 if no efforts are made (DPSA, 2018). This view is supported by the Commission for Employment Equity Annual Report 2016–2017, which reveals the dominance of men in senior management positions (66.7%) (Department of Labour [DoL], 2017). Furthermore, the report reveals that women's representation is at just about half their economically active population at the top management level (DoL, 2018b).

The DPSA (2018) revealed that most departments have been hovering between 45% and 49% since 2015 and seemed not to try to reach the 50% target. Some of the departments were still below 30% regarding women's representation (DPSA, 2018). The dominance of men in leadership positions also increased with salaries so much that the difference between men and women between salary levels 13 and 16 was 15.98% (DPSA, 2018). At the Director-General level (salary level 16), the difference was 47.56%. In contrast to the level below senior management, the percentage of women was less than that of the men for all senior management salary levels: 13 (42.20% women versus 57.80% men), 14 (40.81% women versus 59.19% men), 15 (37.76% women versus 62.24% men), and 16 (26.22% women versus 73.78% men) (DPSA, 2018).

In the context of the education sector (public), in 2016, South Africa had an estimated 294 675 (70%) women teachers out of 418 613 (Stats SA, 2017). This is evidence that many teachers in South African schools were women. Sadly, in 2018, only 36% of women were in the positions of school principals (De Bruyn & Mestry, 2020). De Bruyn and Mestry (2020) further reveal that while women made up 43.9% of the educator workforce in 2018, only 21.4% of them constituted the total number of executive managers of the country and only 17.1% of all directors. In 2017/2018, the Department of Basic Education had a ratio of 38% of women to 62.5% of men appointed in the Senior Management Service (SMS), while the target of 50% of women in the Middle Management Service (MMS) was exceeded by 9%. There is still a significant challenge in reaching the 50% target of the SMS. This situation has occurred despite constitutional efforts regarding equality and gender equity over the past two decades. For this reason, an exploratory study was needed to investigate the content and nature of the various issues that challenge women's ascendency to leadership positions within schools.

Methods and Materials

This study draws from face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in the Gauteng Province, South Africa, with a total of 52 education stakeholders. The participants consisted of six male and female principals, six male and female deputy principals, 12 male and female Departmental Heads (DHs), 18 Post Level one teachers, five male and female members of the School Governing Body (SGB) from staff and parent components, three Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) officials, one representative of South African Principals Association in Gauteng (SAPA), and one labour union representative. Participants were chosen based on their availability, willingness to participate in the study, and ability to express their views as recommended by Ndhlovu (2020). Individual semi-structured interviews were held for approximately 60 minutes per participant on either zoom, face-to-face or telephonic conversation. Participants who chose dates and times for the interview were interviewed on their understanding of culture and its implications on women within the sector, culture-associated factors which they perceived as constitutive of women leader barriers in the province, and their proposed solutions. The interviews were assigned codes from 1 to 52 for ease of reference in the write-up.

The study also benefited from the existing literature reviewed to augment empirical evidence. The reviewed articles were obtained in grey and academic literature and identified using terms such as culture, education, patriarchy, schools, stereotypes, and women leadership in South Africa as key terms. The articles included public records (reports by policy and research institutions), personal records (newspapers, blogs), and academic articles (published journals and books). The inclusion criteria for the articles were that they were supposed to be in South Africa; written in English for easy accessibility; and when published after 1994, when South Africa attained its political independence. Articles published before 1994, articles written in other languages besides English, and articles not specifically about South Africa were excluded. Using this inclusion and exclusion criteria, a total of 15 articles, summarised in Table 1, were identified for analysis. The complete details of the articles are provided in the list of references. Thematic data analysis – a process whereby themes are allowed to

emerge from the collected data – was used. A total of three key themes, namely; patriarchy, stereotypes, and gender roles, were identified as key factors which served as challenges to women leaders in schools in the Gauteng Province.

Table 1 List of Articles Used in the Study

Author(s)	Type of Paper
Bangani and Vyas-Doorgapersad (2020)	Academic
De Bruyn and Mestry (2020)	Academic
Dlanjwa (2018)	Academic
du Toit and Lekoloane (2018)	Academic
Frirtz and Knippenberg (2017)	Academic
Habib and Habib (2020)	Academic
Maseko (2013)	Personal
Mokoena (2018)	Academic
Motshekga (2013)	Personal
Naidoo (2020)	Academic
Nhlapo 2019)	Academic
Nienaber and Moraka (2016)	Academic
Nkenkana (2018)	Academic
Oosthuizen (2018)	Public
Zitha (2022)	Academic

Findings

This section outlines and discusses three major themes that emerged from the findings.

Culture and Patriarchy

The study revealed that culture has certain aspects that disempower women while men are empowered. As a result, men continue to find themselves powerful while women remain weaker. This enables men to compete for whatever job opportunities emerge. In this view, culture sustains patriarchy which, in turn, discriminates against women. One participant stated:

Because culture is a way of life, it easily sneaks into workplaces. No one tends to care to challenge it because once you fall out of line you become its renegade – a cultural renegade" (Participant 44).

This finding of the study is in line with some literature revealed. For instance, Oosthuizen (2018) and Zitha (2022) agreed that culture threw up several aspects that eventually translated to challenges for women within the workplaces and schools. Culture and the traditions emanating from societies are considered part of the challenges women face in leadership positions. Just as African cultures make it the responsibility for men to take care of women within society, the same has been reflected in school leadership (Frirtz & Knippenberg, 2017). Women cannot make decisions without men's permission (du Toit & Lekoloane, 2018). Participants in this study confirmed the problematic role of cultural aspects within Gauteng Province schools. Participants first noted how traditional leadership systems often found their way into workplaces.

The study reveals that patriarchy emerges from culture. Once it emerges, culture continues to sustain and nourish it. Participants revealed that several women professionals within the education sector openly associated the position of the school principal with male qualities. While most women were readily willing to assume deputy principal positions, they were not readily willing to assume school principal roles. This view was confirmed by a participant who mentioned that; "…*because of patriarchy, some women failed to apply for leadership positions because they associated them with men"* (Participant 38).

This finding supports the claim by Frirtz and Knippenberg (2017), who opine that patriarchy always promotes the dominance of men over women. It is a concept of signifying power differences between men and women, where women are victims while men are unnamed perpetrators. Patriarchy is a system of power and inequality favouring men in social, economic and political areas, and provides men with greater access and opportunities (Dlanjwa, 2018).

In the workplace, patriarchy creates a gender wage gap between men (favourable) and women (unfavourable). Due to the internalisation of cultural beliefs by some men and women, some women deliberately did not compete for certain positions, particularly that of the school principal, which they considered a position for men.

It was also revealed that due to the many responsibilities associated with school leadership, some men refused their wives to take up such roles as that would compromise the ability of these women to perform household duties. This was revealed by one participant who mentioned that a husband could also "*decide whether the wife should be employed or not or take up leadership positions or not*" (Participant 17). While some participants identified women's lack of adequate education to compete for leadership positions within schools, they also blamed patriarchy which "*deliberately sanctions the education by boy children more than girl children*" (Participant 49). This lack of adequate education and training was then the cause for the "*low levels of literacy for women for them to compete with men for leadership positions within schools*" (Participant 32). This view is supported by the reviewed literature, which posits that inadequate education and training have affected the ability of women to compete for job opportunities across sectors (De Bruyn & Mestry, 2020; Frirtz & Knippenberg, 2017; Motshekga, 2013). Due to a lack of education and limited training, most women did not know whether there existed conduits through which they could challenge the oppressive nature of patriarchy, which prevented them from competing for leadership positions.

Participants mentioned that women with high educational qualifications, such as Master's degrees, easily sailed to leadership positions compared to those with only a Diploma in education. However, this situation was problematised by participants. One participant mentioned that "*because of patriarchy, women struggled to access leadership positions. Where they did, you will find that they are highly qualified*" (Participant 50). Another participant mentioned that "*you will find that women who are in leadership have worked extra hard when compared to their male counterparts. In most cases, they have numerous certificates and university qualifications*" (Participant 51). Reviewed secondary literature also showed that women with high levels of literacy have high chances of ascending to leadership positions than those with low literacy levels (Bangani & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2020; Habib & Habib, 2020; Maseko, 2013). However, this study observed that within primary schools in the Gauteng Province, women with high literacy levels, such as Master's and Doctoral degrees, were very few. Most had Diplomas, while a few had first degrees.

The study also noted that patriarchy had disempowered women to such an extent that they could support each other in challenging patriarchal tendencies in workplaces. Participants also confirmed the observation that "*women had been so conditioned that they cannot stand up as one man to challenge patriarchy. That is how much worse it has become*" (Participant 43). The reviewed literature noted that women who sought to challenge patriarchy did not have enough support from other women to oppose the status quo (Nkenkana, 2018). It is also revealed that the women who stood up against patriarchy faced the risk of being viewed in a negative light even by other women (Motshekga, 2013; Nhlapo, 2019; Nienaber & Moraka, 2016). One participant mentioned that "*the problem is that most of the women who seek to transform this situation seek to do so violently. Worse so, most of them are not even in marriages*" (Participant 42). Another participant also mentioned that "*some of the women are into same-sex situation thereby complicating their chances of being taken seriously. Culture throws them out, and society excludes them from the privilege of Ubuntu*" (Participant 45). Thus, other women blame them for seeking to disrupt their society (Nienaber & Moraka, 2016). As a result, "*women remain without a strong base from which they can lobby for release by patriarchal tendencies, and thus continue to be oppressed*" (Participant 51). Participants also confirmed what had been observed in the reviewed literature that the oppression of women and their denial of leadership positions within workplaces is further sustained by the lack of strong laws to encourage the promotion of women in workplaces (Nkenkana, 2018).

Culture and Stereotypes

Stereotypes are beliefs that are shared culturally, whereby men and women are expected to behave in a certain way (Mosese & Mearns, 2016). For example, women are expected to fail in managing a secondary school compared to their male counterparts. According to Dlanjwa (2018), men are stereotyped with qualities such as self-confidence and agentic, while women are perceived to be warm and communal. This is classified as a descriptive stereotype. Unfortunately, agentic features are perceived to be crucial traits for leadership (Naidoo, 2020). This view was confirmed by a participant who mentioned that:

Leadership roles require people who are tough. You know what, dealing with teachers is very difficult. You need to be tough to control them. Such is a very masculine job" (Participant 3).

Some participants, including some women school principals, also believed that men could do a better job as a principal than women. For example, a woman principal participant mentioned that:

The job of a principal is not easy. There is a lot that comes in here. People think it is the easiest job where you just sit down and tell others what to do. This is tough. Sometimes I wish I had continued as a teacher. I would be having less stress, and sometimes, I believe men can do it better than me (Participant 4).

It was also the assignment of particular roles to women that often resulted in time constraints for women. Ubiquitous chores eventually leave women with very little time for self-development (Bangani & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2020; Zitha, 2022). Some participants mentioned that time constraints for women emerged from stereotypes that branded the leadership of women as less effective when compared to their male counterparts. Time constraints also emerged as women tended to work overtime all the time, negatively impacting their overall performance. One participant mentioned that *"women worked both at home and at school. By the time they get to school, they are already tired. When the tiredness shows, then they are viewed as lazy, and thus, disrespected by colleagues"* (Participant 16). Surprisingly, some women participants lauded men for their ability to always manage pressure and for striving to succeed in the face of adversity. These participants mentioned that until women can acquire such qualities, their performance will not be competitive enough. This reveals that both male and female participants in this study believed that agentic features are a requirement for capable leadership. Men are often stereotyped with agentic features such as being poised and self-confident, therefore, naturally competent to lead.

Nonetheless, reviewed literature shows that women perceived to be agentic can find themselves in situations whereby they are seen as violating prescriptive stereotypes of being communal, which might work against them (Zitha, 2022). Thus, while one can strive to acquire and display agentic features, such an effort can actually work against them, as observed particularly during the recruitment process. Thus, women in leadership positions are forced to consider how they display agentic features deemed essential for leadership without violating gender stereotypes. This further complicates how women leaders execute their duties within schools.

Stereotypes were reported to be prevalent in the Gauteng Province schools. It was also revealed that these stereotypes often resulted in biased judgments in selecting potential female school leaders. Participants mentioned that the GDE, until only recently, openly preferred leaders who displayed masculine qualities, thereby deliberately side-lining women. Parents also revealed that the GDE secretly preferred leaders who displayed masculine characteristics and that this presented challenges for women candidates who did not fit the masculine analysis of leadership. Feminist scholars, therefore, argued that due to the masculine-oriented concepts of leadership, women were less likely to measure up to the leadership ideal in the province (Naidoo, 2020; Nienaber & Moraka, 2016; Zitha, 2022). This mismatch creates a 'lack-of-fit'. One participant concluded that; "*The incongruity between women gender and the leadership roles has led to bias against women in the GDE*" (Participant 37). Another participant mentioned that:

While the department's stance has changed in recent years, the change has not resulted in any significant consideration of women as competitive leaders. Women remain largely invisible in schools, not only in the Gauteng province but across the country as a whole (Participant 20).

The study also found that in the GDE, women teachers were perceived as employees whose services were best effective only in the classrooms. One female participant, a school principal, revealed how her colleagues were astonished that she could drive a bus because they did not expect her to possess a Professional Driving Permit (PDP) to which they attached masculine requirements.

The study established that in schools where stereotypes were highly prevalent, a female employee seeking to ascend to a leadership position, especially one of the principals, first needed to persuade other teachers and the School Governing Body members to support her. According to one participant, the stereotypical attributes associated with women "…. *tended not to be according to the attributes which are required for senior leadership positions, not only in the department but also in many other sectors*" (Participant 49). This mismatch magnifies the perception that women are less suitable for top leadership positions. Thus, it becomes the basis for discrimination against women when they seek to ascend to senior leadership positions. Culturally-motivated stereotypes, therefore, represent one of the major challenges women leaders face in schools in the province.

Culture and Home-work Responsibilities

Another challenge women often experience when seeking to ascend to leadership positions, which directly stems from culture, is home-work conflict. Culturally, women are expected to do house chores and care for the individuals in the household (Mokoena, 2018; Oosthuizen, 2018). This challenge was confirmed by participants who mentioned:

While men also faced the home-work conflict problem in one way or the other, it was more pronounced to women since they are also considered as the primary caretakers of the home. Thus, the burden of familial duties falls disproportionately on them (Participant 16)

Women participants in the study mentioned that in addition to their workplace duties, they were responsible for cleaning, cooking, washing and caring for their children at home. Participants had mixed views when asked to explain how they considered household roles as one of the challenges to career development. Some participants

did not consider these responsibilities a hiccup in their career growth, while others viewed it as a significant challenge. One participant mentioned:

I would say career-wise, it is not. It does not affect my career professionally. I am able to do my day-to-day duties at home, and I try my level best to do what I'm supposed to do at school (Participant 4).

Some participants, as well as some reviewed feminist literature, posit that the culturally-motivated role assignment within the household needed to be challenged, disrupted, and shattered down as it only served to disempower and oppress women within the workplace, but also within the household (Mokoena, 2018; Naidoo, 2020; Nhlapo, 2019). Participants revealed that the manner in which culture assigned roles based on gender was a grave challenge for women who had dreams of ascending to leadership roles as household duties also continued to exert pressure. Some male participants confirmed that the exemption of women from household chores enabled them to excel in their careers. One male participant acknowledged the problematic role of oppressive cultural elements: "W*e need to give women a chance to lead, especially in higher positions, and have faith in them"* (Participant 51).

Women participants reported that they were faced with situations whereby they had to deal with home and work matters at the same time while having limited time to work on upgrading their careers. Some of these women complained that their husbands were raised to believe and support culturally circumscribed conventions, offering them very little support. One described how difficult it was for her to balance the two main tasks; chores and homework. The homework conflict emerged as one of the fundamental cultural challenges women face daily as a stumbling block to their career advancement. However, while women considered household chores a contributory factor to their lack of ascendency, men seemed to benefit from their exemption from most household chores, although they acknowledged the unfairness of the phenomenon.

Towards a Cultural Revolution for Women Leadership Empowerment

Models are a way of rendering easiness and provide a path for investigating ways to solve societal challenges. They furnish some less straightforward approach to understanding human survival. This study proposed the "Women Forward Model." The model places at the centre the importance of deploying transformational leadership as part of the recipe to move and spread the leadership centre between genders. While the proposed model is not a perfect-finished whole, it at least provides the basis for future models on the empowerment of women leaders within schools. The researchers hope that other researchers will be inspired to develop this model in the best interest of women leaders within schools. The researchers believe that if the model is developed further, it could serve as an effective instrument for resolving challenges amongst women leaders within South African schools.

The model below shows that culture should be the starting point in all the efforts towards the resolution of the challenges which women leaders face in schools. Understanding each society's culture should then lead to a precise understanding of the gender roles, patriarchal tendencies, stereotypes, religious beliefs, and traditional leadership structures that emerge from a particular culture. Once these factors have been identified and understood, concerted efforts by various stakeholders in the education sector can be made to emphasise the important role of women's promotion within schools. Stakeholders could collectively propose culturally-sensitive and context-specific ways of restructuring duties within both the workplace and the household. For example, within the household, the services of housekeepers could also be acknowledged as one way to reduce the number of household chores carried out by both men and women. Stakeholders could also lobby for policies that deliberately promote women to leadership positions by amplifying aspects of women empowerment and gender diversity within workplaces. In addition, stakeholders could also use their collective strength to lobby for the implementation of a quota system in the promotion of professionals to leadership positions within schools.
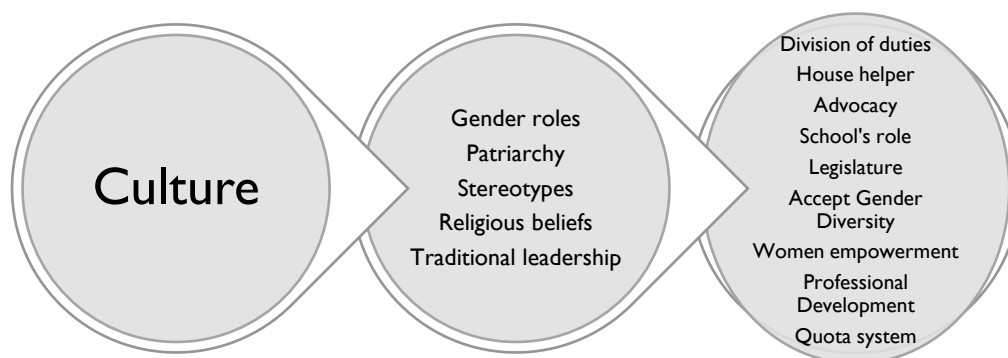
Figure 1 The Women Forward Model

Source: Authors

Concluding Remarks

This article explored the perceived impact of culture on women's leadership in the Gauteng Province Department of Education. The study was necessitated by the fact that women continue to be invisible in school leadership, not only in South Africa, but across the world. While issues of religion, the impact of colonialism, lack of education, and training and education among women are often pushed forward as the key factors for these challenges, the problematic role of culture has not received any adequate scholarly attention. Culturally-motivated injustices continue to frustrate the capacity of women to contribute to societal welfare. Focusing on the Gauteng Province of South Africa, the study shows that culture throws up patriarchal and stereotypical elements that only serve to block how women can participate in leadership at schools. Patriarchy and stereotypes complicated the possibility of women ascending to and performing in leadership positions. In addition, the conflict between home and work responsibilities made many women reluctant to take up leadership roles. The article suggested the Women Forward Model as a potential tool for grappling with cultural–motivated challenges women leaders in schools faced in the province. The study offers scholars an opportunity to further explore the intertwining issues of gender, feminism and school management.

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