

# Gender, Culture and Exclusion of Women in Educational Leadership

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## Abstract

Generally women are the majority in the teaching field especially in primary schools, yet they constitute the least number in positions of authority within the education system. This article examines, the underlying reasons for this under representation of women through a gendered analytical framework, focusing on an empirical research of women deputy heads that was conducted in one of the provinces in Zimbabwe using qualitative interviews. Despite efforts to increase the representation of women in school leadership positions, their numbers have remained very low. Research that I have conducted in the last ten years do show that gender roles, culture and gender relations influence women's rise into leadership positions. Arising from these observations are questions such as: why do women's numbers in managerial and leadership positions continue to be low? What messages do women aspiring for leadership positions get from their female counterparts who act as their role models? The issues that emerged from the study and literature included lack of acceptance of women leaders by both male and female teaching staff, the assumption that leadership is for men was supposedly linked to women's lack of aspiration. The possible barriers to women's advancement and the strategies that create opportunities for more women in educational leadership was linked to cultural constraints from both the society and organisational institutions thus including the challenges women face as educational leaders.

**Keywords:** Gender, leadership, socialisation, under-representation, organisation

## **Introduction**

Socialisation allows for the transmission of culture from one generation to another. Schools and teachers play a major role in transmitting societal values to a nation. For instance children ‘mirror themselves in the characters and roles that they see or read about and learn’ and at times inspire to be like those people portrayed (Mutare Teacher’s College 2009:35). Certain adjustments with regards to division of labour in society have to be made if women are to receive equal employment opportunities. While the underlying reasons for the under representation of women in educational leadership are diverse and contested, research shows that gender roles, cultural norms and gender relations influence women’s advancement into leadership positions (Rogers 2009). This is done and made possible through socialisation, since it is a society’s culture and the way people are socialised that women are often steered away from leadership positions. For instance, it cannot be argued that leadership and managerial role requires appropriate behaviour, however, what can be contested is who defines what is considered appropriate. Mutare Teacher’s College (2009:35) argued that ‘school curricula’ and the ‘values’ associated with it ... ‘have a role to play in raising awareness of gender sensitivity’ particularly within patriarchal societies. Teachers as agents of change are the key instruments in reshaping attitudes and perceptions of young pupils towards the issue of gender role socialisation. It is important to use a similar process to prepare individuals for the roles they are to play, and to provide them with necessary skills, ‘repertoire of habits, beliefs and values’ (Mutare Teacher’s College 2009). Sharing gender roles in both domestic and private spheres and consciousness-raising within the community for people to appreciate the work of women is critical, if the problem of women’s disadvantage and under-representation is to be improved or overcome (Mumba 1997). One of the most important stages in this socialisation is the early childhood developmental stage. According to McFadden (1997), men are socialised not only to be public holders of power, but to own and control the major resources of society in which women are taken to be a critical part of those resources. Literature also shows that women are not expected to aspire to the same high professional and occupational status as men (Gaidzanwa 1993; Addi-Racchah 2002; Shakeshaft, Brown, Irby, Grogan & Ballenger 2007) and as such lack support and encouragement even when they assume the leadership positions.

The study from which this article drew was carried out in Marondera district, about seventy kilometres away from the eastern side of Harare in Zimbabwe. Out of the eight schools two women heads of school were from urban primaries, two from peri urban, two from rural and the other two were from farm schools. Like other developing countries, Zimbabwe has a rich diversity of cultures with political, social and economic features rooted in tradition and patriarchal values (Jayaweera 1997). Schools in Zimbabwe are classified as:

Government schools or non-Government schools and in such other categories as the Minister may determine, taking into account the social and economic standards of the communities in which the schools concerned are situated (Education Act 1996:619).

In the field of education in Zimbabwe, there is the School Development Committee (SDC) for non-government school and School Development Association (SDA) for government schools. These committees mobilise parents in the building of schools, the paying of levies and they see to it that the school fulfils its function. The SDC is a committee that provides and assists the operation and development of the school within a non-governmental school. It promotes the welfare of the school for the benefit of its present and future pupils and their parents and teachers. It is charged with control of the financial affairs of the school for which it has established. In the exercise of its functions a School Development Committee has the power to employ, hire or fire the staff in order to serve the needs of the school, and this power is exercised with the approval of the Minister.

The School Development Association provides the same services as that for the SDC committee with only small differences since the SDA represents Government schools. SDA members are elected parents of the pupils enrolled at the school and the teachers employed at those schools. This body serves to promote and encourage the development and maintenance of the school, and assists in the advancement of moral, cultural and intellectual welfare of pupils at the school.

The exclusion of women can be traced back from the past to the present factors at both the individual and societal levels where the teaching starts at home, with the mother trying to interact with her infant, who in-turn responds with certain movements and some form of smiles and cries. It is

through this initial stage that the child learns to follow simple instructions and commands through the process of interaction and this forms part of the very primary socialisation (Mutare Teacher's College 2009). Even through observation, the child is able to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. An infant's social relation starts with his/her mother and those norms and values are extended to other members of the family and society at large. Although this may sound primitive and issues of the past, what is clear is that women still experiences challenges emanating from both cultural forces and human practices.

The debate is about gender, culture and the exclusion of women in Educational leadership. In Zimbabwe boys and girls perform different duties and are always reminded to behave like a human, suggesting that some unacceptable behaviour outside the norm has been observed. The school then serves as agents of the society by transmitting the values of society to pupils and thus bringing in Bourdieu's (1997) concept of cultural capital and cultural reproduction. For Bourdieu, cultural capital can be identified in three forms which are: 'the embodied state' (mind and body) 'the objectified state' (cultural goods such as books, pictures and others) and the 'institutionalised state' which can be viewed as the final product which is the educational qualification (Bourdieu's 1997:47). The writer in this article points to this form of capital which is acquired through agents of society such as the family and the school, and argue that the type of socialisation can thus be revisited and transformed.

This article focuses on gender and the influence of culture on women and leadership within the field of education. To pursue on this issue, the article discusses the family as the initial institution where much of the social construction of gender takes place. The purpose is to reflect on how cultural norms emphasise gender differences which result in strengthening men's dominance in educational leadership. By presenting a brief review of literature on gender and education, I provide the backdrop to the study that will help us understand the mechanism that serves as exclusionary measures for more women to be in leadership positions. In addition, the mainstream leadership theory will be examined. Literature shows that the dominating leadership and management theory has shaped the assumptions, beliefs and values that have become the underpinning of organisational theory (Addi-Racah 2002; Ford, 2005; Shakeshaft, Brown, Irby, Grogan and Ballenger 2007).



## **Social Construction of Gender**

Much of the construction of gender takes place within the family particularly in the area of parenting. Raditloaneng (2011: 202) defined gender as ‘a socio-culturally constructed notion of the roles of men and women in any society’. It is the psychological, social and cultural differences in access to vocational education between man and women. Muthivhi, 2010 investigating South Africa children’s acquisition and development of thinking and concepts, highlighted the impact of a child’s participation in social roles and activities with regards to his/her cognitive development. The findings confirmed that the social and cultural context have direct impact on a child performance which in turn determines career opportunities. The issue of opportunities relating to girls and women has been well articulated by Okin (1989) who had a strong feeling that the family to a large extent determines children’s life opportunities of what they can become of. Her belief was that almost every person in society starts life in a family of some sort and while the family varies it is where socialisation takes place. On the other hand, Rawls (2003) sees the family as the foundation for building and/or developing children’s capacities and opportunities for their future roles and careers. It should not be taken for granted that child development does not only happen through socialisation of verbal interaction, but by observation and imitation.

Traditionally in Zimbabwe, like any other African countries, girls were mostly prepared for marriage, and hence their education was restricted to lower levels of learning till after the 1980 when issues of inequalities were being observed. Mutare Teachers’ College (2009), Challenged the family as agents of socialisation for the young child, suggesting that parents and guardian’s beliefs and value are influential to the child’s career path and at times their life-style. What was the trend in developing countries was to value sons more than daughters. Parents saw their sons’ education as an investment; they were not just educating their children. Parents expected to receive greater returns from educating sons. This seems why for instance King and Hill (1993:27) pointed out that ‘unless daughters transfer part of their future income to their parent, who must bear some of the costs of their education, parents may not have sufficient incentive to send them to school’. While this is not true to every family, it confirms Okin’s (1989:16) observation that ‘the opportunities of girls and women are centrally affected by the structure and practices of family life’. It can be acknowledged that

people are beginning to realise the importance of every child. However, what parents value in relation to their children's futures partly, determines the level of education the child gets and the kind of individual (socially and morally) that child will be as an adult person. Eagly and Carli (2007) commented on how women become leaders, noted that gender stereotyping and attributes such as assertiveness, control and confidence more often ascribed to men than women, emanate from cultural beliefs and have an impact on how both of them are perceived. In-fact such stereotype thinking generate feelings and attitudes within a society that excludes more than include women. Although for some people, the valuing of sons' education more than that of daughter' seems to be a thing of the past, the issue still exists and is a global phenomenon.

In the United States and other developed countries, schooling for girls was also designed to prepare them to be better wives and mothers and for a better life in their private spheres, which was the home (Schmuck 1996; Sperandio 2010; Bissessar 2011). Thus women's oppression was and is still reinforced by the way in which 'we are positioned by our own parents' and the society as a whole. Parents in developing countries such as Zimbabwe believe that girls would eventually marry and leave their natal homes hence the women's disadvantage is perpetuated through the traditional culture and the certain values of society. Although there are shifting norms and standards, gender blindness in policy analysis concerning women and education reveals itself as not much has been done through curriculum modification, to sensitise learners and the communities. Mapolisa and Madziyire (2012) acknowledge that the progress of women has been impacted negatively by tradition and the way women are socialised. It is through schooling that specific definitions of gender are constructed, modified and transmitted to each new generation. Gender awareness in schools is therefore important since it is a stage when people are informed and come to know of the existence of gender differences in the roles of men and women. Raditloaneng (2011:207) acknowledged that 'gender sensitivity entails not only awareness but taking requisite steps to bridge the gender gaps'. This statement challenges the curriculum development designers that promote skills, knowledge and attitudes towards employment. Attitude can be negative or positive hence, the importance of curriculum designers to portray images that create in both girls and boys, positive attitudes towards taking different responsibilities, including leadership and management in schools.

## **Gender, Education and the Exclusion of Women**

Educational institutions tend to reproduce the gender order in different forms. The school as one of the key institutions for the construction of gender is seen as the prime site for socialisation (Mutare Teacher' College 2009). In examining further how schooling reproduces gender and social order, (MacDonald 1980; Riddell 1992) it is important to reflect on gender codes and the teachers' construction of masculinity and femininity. As mentioned before, gender identity and gender roles are constructed under the classification of the school system. Moreover such classifications tend to set boundaries of what is termed appropriate activities for the different sexes. A prevailing culture can privilege some above others. In Zimbabwean textbooks women and men are portrayed according to culturally accepted gender roles: that is women as mothers and housewives, and men performing outdoors activities. Commenting on such portrayals, Rutherford (2001:371-372) noted that 'cultures exclude as well as include'. These are some of the taken for granted, and even today some people tend to believe that, since gender policies have been designed issues of inequality or exclusion of women no longer exist.

Even though there are policies that should be addressing subtle practices, discrimination and exclusion of women in the work place, Moorosi (2010) commenting on the South African context, observed that there is little change that has happened. This has been acknowledged by Lumby and Azaola (2011) when they pointed out how in South Africa, the women educational leaders were persistently prejudiced. Teachers tend to reinforce the notion of masculinity and femininity in the classroom by making use of comments that are evaluative of and places boundaries between future work and what is seen as appropriate. Such comments become part of the hidden curriculum which in the process of interaction, act as exclusionary measures to other carrier avenues leading to positions such as school leadership.

The issue of the curriculum has been noted by Colley (1998) who indicated that the choice of educational routes and achievement in different subject areas are influenced by many factors including stereotypes of male and female abilities, social roles, family backgrounds and teacher beliefs which forms part of the hidden curriculum. Taking further the above argument, Riddell (1992) focusing on pupils' understanding of school subjects and their perception of the gender appropriateness of particular

subjects, found out that girls perceived technical subjects as bearing no future for them as they believed that these subjects belonged to masculine areas of the curriculum. On a similar note Mthethwa (2011) referring to Swaziland observed that schools are one of the agents of socialisation that contribute to the social construction of gender inequalities through the curriculum which is also gender biased. Ramaili, (2011) also referring to teacher beliefs and approaches to curriculum implementation, argued that the hidden curriculum plays a crucial role in the development of students from their primary, through to secondary, tertiary and as adults and professionals. The hidden curriculum is the unstated norms, values and beliefs that pupils learn consciously or unconsciously. The reasons why there are few women in educational leadership vary.

In Zimbabwe Gordon 1994 found that girls were channelled into traditionally feminine curriculum areas such as typing, cookery and needlework, in preparation for adult domestic and occupational roles. This resulted in most women being involved in less skilled and less intensive activities such as food and vegetable vending and hence their under-representation in professional and administrative positions. There were numerous obstacles that women faced that contributed to their lack of rise and occupation of top management positions. However the elimination of gender stereotype in textbook and the production of gender sensitive material is not easy. This was acknowledged by Kobia (2009) who examined the portrayal of gender images in primary school English textbooks in Kenya, and found that males were depicted as superior in all spheres of life while females were attributed as inferior. Similar studies were in Hungarian textbooks, Kereszty (2009), Philippine textbooks Tan (2009) and Panday (2006) confirmed that socio-cultural values are reproduced and reinforce, influence and shape the behaviour and attitudes of boys and girls in the society.

The above information coincided with what was echoed by one of the retired teachers interviewed by the Zimbabwe Herald (1998:13) who acknowledged an incident of the past, that 'teaching conditions were difficult for early women teachers. They were paid less even when they had the same qualifications'. Thus a reflection of social injustice revealed itself and was being exercised in a patriarchal society. Although this situation disappeared after Zimbabwe's independence, a similar incident developed in which women were heavily taxed based on their husbands' salaries. The more the

husbands earned the more the wife was taxed. This move disempowered women and contributed to strained marriage relationships. This was a reflection of a typical patriarchal society with a culture of exclusionary mechanisms that predominantly positioned women as subordinates and marginal to their counterparts, creating even bigger gaps between male and female educational leaders. The cultural norm was that men were perceived as breadwinners hence this strategy to preserve their status became a source of oppression and disadvantage for the women.

### **Promotional Chances for Female Leadership**

Studies in New Zealand (Court 1993; 1994), Australia, and Canada (Blackmore 1992) show that women's promotional chances were diminished by breaks in services such as maternity leave as their previous work experience was not taken into account. On their return to teaching they were not recognised as experienced employees who were previously in the service before the break. This type of exclusionary measures was also echoed by Sperandio (2010) highlighting the problem of promotional practices which are gender neutral. On the other hand women, for instance in the United States, had to have at least twenty years of teaching experience to qualify for appointment to educational administrative positions (Shakeshaft 1987). In some countries, it was the state policies, that female teachers were required to resign from permanent employment as soon as they got married or were raising children (Patrickson, Hartmann & McCarron 1994). These conditions meant that women had less opportunity for leadership in schools (Edson 1988; Jones 1990). Similar situations affected women in educational employment in Zimbabwe.

The devaluing of women by men and other members of society, and the negative attitudes towards women by those who are involved in recruitment, contribute to the under-representation of women in school leadership positions (Alkhalifa 1989; Hackney 2010; Shakeshaft 1987). Sometimes women are excluded from decision-making positions due to the recruitment strategies that make advertising a formality when in-fact, a person has already been identified to fill the position (Mumba 1997). On another note, the masculine image of management explains the reluctance of some women teachers to take up leadership positions. The negative attitudes towards women leadership also become discriminatory actions and barriers to

women aspiring for administrative posts as many of those already in positions receive little or no support from the communities. This is due to the lack of recognition of women leadership which is possibly influenced by a traditional culture which tends to devalue women, and view male leadership as the norm (Shakeshaft 1987; Shakeshaft *et al.*).

### **Theoretical/ Conceptual Framework**

The framework for this study is based on the recognition that women and men are different and acknowledges the role of socialisation in determining leadership. Within this framework, the argument raised in this article is that the theories that privilege the heroic behaviours, and considers leadership as innate to the male species alone, are promoting patriarchal mechanisms and exclusionary practices that have since marginalised and excluded women from leadership opportunities (Rutherford 2001; Applebaum, Audet & Miller 2002). Concurrent with this thinking is McGregor's (2010) concern about frameworks, suggesting that the choice be based on an understanding of women's status in senior management and in all forms of employment. The framework that includes and caters for both male and female is the one opted for in this study.

For instance, 'The Great man' leadership model excluded the female experience in that the development of theory was limited to males who dominated the area of study in the early years. The earliest work in leadership research examined leadership traits, the approach to leadership that emphasised the innate rather than learned psychological differences. Researchers using this approach 'attempt to isolate specific traits that endow leaders with unique qualities that differentiate them from their followers' (Hoy & Miskel 1987:271) and such traits include physical characteristics (height, weight), a host of personality factors, values, charisma and energy. Hoy and Miskel (1996:376) argued that 'many individuals still believe, as Aristotle did centuries ago, that from the hour of birth some are marked for subjection, others for rule' suggesting that the trait approach is by no means dead and gone. Aristotle thought that individuals were born with characteristics that would make them leaders and leaders according to Hoy and Miskel were generally regarded as superior individuals who, because of their fortune inheritance or social circumstances (for instance the males), possessed qualities and abilities that differentiated them from people in

general (in this case the females). This theory dominated the field of leadership until the 1950s.

Even the language mostly defined leadership in male terms. Irby, Brown, Duffy and Trautman (2002:306) noted how ‘theories were generalised to both males and female even though they did not take into account the female experience or significantly include females in the sample population for development’. Gender divergence and gender subordination cannot be explored using a seemingly rigid and universal approach. The need to provide a way of understanding cultural and historical deference is reflected in research findings such as those by Irby *et al.* (2002) and Bissessar (2011) which show how the mechanisms of excluding women perpetuated the under-representation of women in management positions.

The concept of management is seen to be rooted in Taylor’s background and experience as a labourer, clerk machinist and chief engineer whose belief was that, individuals could be programmed to be efficient machines (Hoy & Miskel 1987:8); hence management of schooling can be seen to be directed toward the achievement of certain educational objectives. While leadership is a process of influencing colleagues in setting and achieving goals of an organisation or a school, the above mentioned approach to management does not reflect gender awareness component of women’s approaches and experience. Current literature however, shows that empowering employees is a key factor in managerial and organisational effectiveness (Moye, Henkin & Eagley 2005), a recent understanding that moves the concept to what may accommodate the different genders. One of the feminists writers regard trait thinking as by nature ‘gender stereotypic’ since the approach assumes innate differences and the construct of leadership tend to exhibit the desired traits (Blackmore 1998:102).

Leach (2003) observed that Gender Analysis Frameworks, while they have been designed for different purposes, they are a guide and give room for thinking about for instance the context that shapes the relationships and dynamics of both males and females. Women use interactive approaches to leadership and thus facilitate communication between and among followers. Women’ tendency to use power that comes through sharing ideas and information, though perceived as feminine characteristics, reflect the qualities of transformational leaders and even goes beyond. Transformational leaders inspire others to perform beyond expectation (Hau Siu Chow 2005). This approach to leadership empowers others and therefore assumes the qualities

that would facilitate for more women to aspire for leadership positions. By adopting skills that provide individuals with self-interest in doing good and, by showing empathy and being good listeners, female leaders show respect for human dignity and hence display qualities of empowering in leadership. Although transformational leadership is challenged for not being gender sensitive in some areas, communication as one of the gender analysis tool help us understand that one can share information, train people even to further steps and sensitise them to gender issues. I therefore content that these two augur well and are useful lenses.

## **Design and Methodology**

The chosen design for this study was qualitative within the interpretivist paradigm. 8 women deputy heads of schools were identified using snowball sampling. The first person was purposively chosen who then identified the next member for inclusion in the sample and like a ball rolling the sample grew (Patton 2002). Snowball sampling is an approach for locating 'information-rich key informants' and the criteria for selection was based on experience, understanding of the phenomenon and willingness to be involved. In-depth interviews were used as a means of generating data. This approach allows for free interaction between the researcher and the interviewer. Qualitative approach is concerned with detailed descriptions of situations and events (Patton 2002), hence the importance of this methodology in finding out people's experiences of the world. The research examined how women deputy heads in primary schools in Zimbabwe perceived their role as women educational leaders in relation to: the demands of their role, the promotional chances for more women to be in leadership, the support systems and the attitudes of school community, their personal aspirations and barriers. Gender analysis is adopted for this study.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### ***The Women's Backgrounds***

Of the eight women deputy heads only one was in a school which had a woman as a head. Six of the women were located in rural schools (two worked in communal areas and four in farms schools). The other two deputy



school heads were located in a peri-urban and urban areas. The women's ages ranged from thirty-six to fifty-five years. All except one were married and had children ranging from primary to University. Six of the women did their teacher training after their O-level examination. The other two trained after standard six and junior certificate respectively. One of the women deputies did a secretarial course before joining teacher training, while the other started as untrained teacher for at least a year. At the time of research, three of the participant had just completed the Bachelor of Education degree (BEd) programme in administration through part-time studies. Two were still working to complete their degrees and the other three were still deciding about future study. These participants were given pseudonyms with title 'Mrs' which is culturally appropriate for representing a married woman in Zimbabwe. Some of the names were Ivy, Enita, Lonkina, Linda, Bute, Gomo, Muza.

### ***Ambition for Headship and Expectations***

When the women became teachers, only one had the ambition of becoming a head-teacher. One of the women thought that she had no leadership qualities. Other women had different reasons for their lack of ambition such as feeling of rejection, that teachers and children might not respect them, another one thought, that since she had a tiny body people might also not respect her as their leader. Initially, the other women who did not have the ambition to become heads and deputy heads perceived leadership to be for men and it was natural in their sight. This was one of the reasons given for their lack of motivation to apply for a deputy head-ship post. The fact that the schools in which they were to be deployed were mostly in rural areas made some to be reluctant to apply. Of all the women interviewed, only one was encouraged by her husband to apply. In fact Mrs Gomo and her husband contested at the same time for the posts of school deputy and were both appointed to different schools. Interestingly, they were treated differently. Mrs Gomo spent eight years as a deputy, while her husband got promoted to the post of head within five years of being a deputy.

The other women indicated that their husbands had negative feelings about their wives seeking promotion to school headship positions. Mrs Bute noted, 'When I was appointed to this post, my husband thought that I would head the home as well. He assumed there might be a change in the way we live'. A single woman deputy-head was encouraged to apply for the position

by her mother, who wished her to be a teacher, when she was initially doing secretarial course. Another participant, Mrs Muza still on ambition commented, ' I was just trying luck; I thought I had no leadership qualities'. Mrs Muza expressed shock at her first appointment day when she discovered that every member had been given the same time for the interview appointment. While she was waiting to be interviewed she found herself and everyone else who was there being allocated schools. Among the eight women, six were appointed to the job after having been interviewed. The other two were among the group that was not interviewed, but were all allocated schools. The normal trend in Zimbabwe however was that the posts would be advertised and people apply, get short listed and if called, they are all interviewed, which was not the case in the findings of this study.

The women expected a change in their salaries, however three of the women indicated that the increments they got were meaningless given the fact that they were already at the top end of their senior teacher grade.

### ***Advancement of Women into Leadership Positions***

The findings showed that promotions within the Ministry of Education did not reflect the female character or any sensitivity of women status. Considering that promotion in Zimbabwe is determined by seniority and given that the career breaks by women taking maternity leave required them to resign first, their return was nothing more than just a new teacher. This meant that women teachers remained at a junior level until they are over the age of child-bearing, resulting in fewer opportunities for leadership in schools. This seems why for instance Sperandio (2010:720) argued that 'gender neutral promotion practice appears to favour men. Women ... during a career for childrearing will rank much lower than male counterparts on the seniority scale and thus get offered a leadership position much later in her career'

Quite often this meant that junior male colleagues were promoted ahead of their senior female counterparts and that was a good example of how different mechanisms of gender and exclusion worked.

This kind of scenarios is now changing. The added requirement that those who seek promotion must first be appointed in rural settings also eliminated many eligible females who are tied down by family responsibilities. The requirement for going to a rural school first was one of

the key barriers that discouraged many women from aspiring to be heads of deputy heads. Many urban based women teachers, especially those with families, found it difficult to leave their families behind. While there is the assumption that advancement opportunities for women are now open, gender stereotyping remains another key barrier. Some of the policies did not take into consideration Bulani's (1996) observation that women start on a 'deficit balance of opportunity'. In Zimbabwe, caring for children is a woman's duty which sometimes makes it difficult for women to set it aside in order to go for a promotion or handle the two at the same time – especially if it involves major transfers. In the past men benefited through policies that discriminated women as far as promotion were concerned and today they continue to benefit by setting conditions which are not gender sensitive, that have the effect of shutting many women out of the competition.

Despite the existence of the promotional policy that sought to increase the number of women in administrative positions, the women considered that their promotional chances were still limited. Certainly, as the experience of women shows, balancing a family and career can challenge even the best leader (Manning & Haddock 1989). Before applying for the post, the women had to think twice, calculate the benefits and compare whether it was worth going for the post. The salary difference in itself was de-motivating given the costs of shifting and setting up a new home, many potential women leaders were steered away. An understanding of the constraints limiting the number of women to be in leadership positions is thus essential if the situation is to be rectified.

### ***Attitudes of Community***

The women noted that it was the general perception of many people in school settings to regard as problematic, women who aspired for positions of authority. My findings show that the women school heads were victimised or oppressed by some individual school leaders who took advantage of those normative elements to pursue their own agenda or will in the name of culture. Rutherford (2001:372) noted that 'cultures embody systems of meaning' and at times 'people form attachments to their cultures which explains why there is always a lot of resistance to culture change'. One of the participants Enita was 'by-passed' and 'over-ruled' when she first became a deputy. The head of her school had strong feelings of resentment, reflected in his behaviour.

The extent to which this behaviour affected Enita's self-esteem is noticed in how she described her feelings when she said: 'I was more of a rubber stamp' and her indication that she was not given the opportunity nor was she involved in decision making of school activities.

From my findings it is clear that women experienced resistance when they first entered the field of leadership. The participants' descriptions show that their initial entry in schools as women school leaders was a challenge and change of culture, resulting in what they called 'culture shock'. However, Enita believes in working with the community towards a common goal. She feels that progress can only be achieved if everyone is actively involved. She describes how she managed to address the problem of children's in-discipline:

I held meetings with the teachers ... (A10) Dialogue continued and I interacted with ... until everyone was actively involved. (A11) ... these meetings were particularly targeted for improving discipline problems and in the process student performance.

An alternative paradigm shift brought about by women in their efforts to deal with challenging situations was creativity. For instance, in the case of an acting head who refused to surrender the keys, Ivy designed a strategy that could be seen as less hierarchical, less authoritative, that's creating what Jamali *et al.* (2006) would call a post-bureaucratic school or organisation. Ivy acknowledged that 'moving around, passing on good comments and sharing information on how the acting head did some of his work must have enhanced the acting head's perception of himself'. Ivy believes that the man felt encouraged and honoured since he finally relocated himself, without anyone's command or order (authority). In this case, culture could indeed be said, 'is built through the every-day interactions' of members of the organisation (Saphier & King 1985:72). What Ivy did could be perceived as creating a positive atmosphere within the school, and this can be perceived as part of a given school culture. Just like Enita's belief in the creation of conducive atmosphere for the children at her school was being creative. The culture of her school could be seen as changed from one where bullying was tolerated to one where children show respect for others.

### ***Learning***

In Linda's approach, Jamali's (2006:1) view of schools as organisations also

features with people continually expanding their capacity and where ‘new patterns of thinking are nurtured’. This can also be perceived as re-shaping the culture of a school from dominating ideas to sharing ideas. However, the women’s descriptions tended to reflect a holistic approach – a phenomenological view which links the organisation with its people and respects the values of others. Linda believed in both leading and learning. She believed that by accepting ‘criticism’ one is able to learn

Linda’s decision comes as a result of shared ideas. She enjoys working collectively sharing knowledge. Linda has become so used to ‘working as a team’ that she does not see herself as separate from others (B4). She feels she cannot work alone (B36). ‘I plan together with ...deputy and senior teacher all activities’ (B27).

## **Conclusion**

Through socialisation, a society’s culture and the way people perceive one another as human beings can be improved. The article argued that despite efforts to increase the representation of women in school leadership positions, their numbers have remained very low. Research shows that one’s culture, gender roles, and society’s values tend to influence women’s choice of career advancement and leadership opportunities. Certain adjustments with regards to division of labour in society need to be made if women are to receive equal employment opportunities. Although a few talked about affirmative action programmes as seeking to promote more women into school leadership positions, other women leaders perceived it as a male conspiracy to keep women in subordinate positions. Despite the limited number of research participants which makes it difficult to generalise the findings, it is hoped that the women’s descriptive accounts offer valuable insights into challenges women face in their struggle for better career opportunities and senior leadership positions.

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