Women Leaving Leadership: Learnings from Female School Principals in Gauteng Province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This instrumental case study investigates reasons behind female school principals resigning from their posts as school principals in Gauteng Province in South Africa. The qualitative study focused on the experiences of two purposefully chosen former school principals who resigned from their leadership positions before retirement. Data were collected through in-depth face-to-face individual interviews which were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researchers. Direct quotations were used to present the data, and these were thematically analysed using content analysis. The study established that female school principals in the study resigned from their positions because of individual, social and work-related barriers. Insidious, subtle, discriminatory gender-related practices and barriers that worked against the leadership of women were established. Key among these were jealousy, backbiting, rejection of female authority, lack of support from colleagues, lack of role models, isolation, discrimination and loneliness. These barriers were the same as those that contributed to the underrepresentation of females from positions of leadership as reviewed in the literature review. The study recommends a change of attitudes regarding leadership perception by individuals, society and organisations. While the findings of this study are useful in providing insights as is the case in most qualitative studies; the sample is rather small for generalisability. Hence it is recommended that future researchers could conduct large-scale research on this aspect.

Keywords: 'Boys' club, emotional labour, female school principals, gender roles, glass ceiling, glass escalator, socio-cultural contexts, women leaving leadership

INTRODUCTION

Women leaving leadership positions is a significant threat to gender equity and equality which are imperatives of the twenty-first century. Nonetheless, female attrition has received little attention as more focus is directed towards other issues that affect gender equity such as underrepresentation of women in organisations. The international community, for example, has come up with some conventions aimed at redressing women's underrepresentation in positions of leadership. The 1965 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination [CERD] and the 1979 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women are some of the conventions.

Despite measures to improve gender equity such as the above mentioned, trends indicate that the numbers of women in leadership is dwindling. Cropsey et al. (2008) found that attrition of women was a severe problem at the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine. Likewise, the Gender Advisory Council (2008) found that women attrition in organisations was a problem and likened it to a leaking pipeline. They found that women were lost from the pipeline through voluntary termination at a rate two or three times faster than men once they had attained the mid-career, manager/senior manager level of their careers. The drop in female leadership was also evident in Masvingo Province secondary schools in Zimbabwe where out of a total of, 5.69%

female school principals in 2009 (Chabaya et al., 2009) the numbers plummeted down to 2.66% (Research Director, 2016).

Research data on female school principals' attrition in South Africa is very scarce. Jackson and Rothman (2005) voiced concern about the lack of empirical research that systematically investigated this phenomenon in this country. Hence this study makes a critical contribution in this respect.

However, literature concerning challenges that female school principals encounter in South Africa abound (Bosch, 2015; Damons, 2008; Moorosi, 2007, 2010). A study by Moorosi (2010) indicated that the historical legacy of apartheid discriminated against race, culture, ethnicity and women from leadership. She indicated that at the organisational level, patriarchal values and practices, devalued transformation processes aimed at gender equity and at social level, women lacked support from families and colleagues. Women principals lacked mentors, and their authority was resisted by both male and female colleagues at the workplace (Bosch, 2015).

To unveil the reasons behind the attrition of women in leadership, the study is guided by the following sub-questions: (i).What cultural and social practices contribute to women leaving positions as schools principals? (ii).What are the work practices that contribute to women leaving positions as school principals?

Cultural and Social Perspectives on Leadership

According to Higham et al. (2015), cultural factors, especially socialisation, influence whether one becomes a leader or not. A cross-national analysis of countries in Western and Eastern Europe, Scandinavia and North America revealed that gender roles played a significant part in determining the different cultural and societal value orientation (Maseko, 2013). The author theorises that men and women's behaviour is influenced by cultural and psychological processes which are internalised through the process of socialisation. Men and women are socialised into traditional gender roles. Girls are taught to obey and boys to be strong and be leaders. Girls learn everything associated with 'women's duties' and boys are taught to be the masters of the world (Marinova, 2003). This, in turn, shapes career orientation for men and women.

According to Dana (2009), some cultures, such as those of the Pacific countries like Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, openly value males as superior and females as subordinates. In other cultures, such as in New Zealand and Melanesia, women are treated violently when they try to take a different role, assert their rights or take behaviour that differs from the culture's familiar role that they must take (Dana, 2009). In Turkey, the issue of motherhood and becoming a good spouse are critical for a good woman (Evetts in Inandi, 2009).

Bourdieu views habitus as necessary in developing and internalising ways of approaching, thinking about and acting upon our social world (Perumal, 2007). Similarly, Critical Feminists view the self as a result of power relations of groups of people in particular socio-cultural and historical contexts (Qin, 2004). In South Africa, the ideology of patriarchy or androcentrism, that is, viewing the world from a man's perspective, acts as a barrier to women's advancement because of the attitudes, and routine practices taught and reinforced (Bosch, 2015; Moorosi, 2007, 2010).

Contrary to the views raised above, in China, the traditional ethic that men are superior to women are decreasing, and women in education view themselves highly (Qiang et al., 2009).

Practices at the Workplace

Women rarely break the glass ceiling at the workplace, and for those that manage to break, they continue to suffer from occupational segregation (Maseko, 2013; Naidoo, 2013; Zikhali, 2013). Celikten (in Inandi, 2009) defined the glass ceiling as the "invisible and insurmountable barriers that exist between women and levels of top management and that prevent women from making progress". Cultural factors influence the level of support for women candidates and values to shape the beliefs of gatekeepers and perceptions of what should count as important (Siemienska, 2004). Gender-based social roles are carried into the workplace, where institutional and organisational structures reproduce gender differences through daily practices, routines and internal structures (Smulder,

2008). These relations are kept in place by both dominant actors and subordinates who subscribe to social and organisational reality and these form part of the glass ceiling (ibid). On the contrary, Ryan and Haslam (2005) noted that while women were affected by the glass ceiling, "men are likely to be conveyed into management positions by a glass escalator".

A study by Collinson (2002) indicated that although leaders and managers were progressively cautious about expressing negative attitudes concerning female leaders, related attitudes were persistent and evident in personnel policies. In South Africa, policy implementation has failed policy intent, and there is a continuous preference for male leadership at the appointment level (Bosch, 2015). Resultantly, only a few women move up the organisational ladder hence the structures that reproduce gendered barriers remain the same, and these pose unique challenges for women professionals who pursue careers in them (ibid).

Relationships at the Workplace

As earlier mentioned, organisations are male-dominated. The lack of women in senior positions makes them feel marginalised (White, 2003). Furthermore, research has indicated that women are exposed to sexism and harassment from male counterparts and senior colleagues (De Wede & Laursen, in Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016).

The other aspect of male domination is experienced through the exclusion of women from male networks usually known

as the 'boys' clubs' (Celiktan in Inandi, 2009). Male leaders have the advantage of networking which encourages and supports senior-level promotion while women do not. Senior female executives in a study by Sperling, Marcati and Rennie (2014) commented that some of the decisions that affected organisations were made in informal settings which women did not have access to. Blackmore (1989) likened the old 'boys' club' to a 'male mafia'. Women who try to join these groups are viewed as being too radical by other female colleagues and as a potential source of conflict and disruptiveness by male colleagues (Blackmore, 1989). A senior female manager in a study by Sperling et al. (2014) explained that it was culturally challenging to have business lunch with a male colleague or to stay late in the office during the evenings. At times, if women made contributions or criticisms, they were referred to as nagging or as bitches. According to Lang et al. (2012), lack of social support from colleagues and administrators can cause burnout, that is, emotional exhaustion.

Attempts at equal opportunities have met with resistance from men who believe that a master should not serve under a mistress. Sometimes male subordinates create undercurrents that undermine the authority of female school heads (Chipunza, 2003). As a result, when they make a mistake or encounter a setback, it is received with much jubilation (Phillips in Chipunza, 2003). There are also well-reported instances where female colleagues resented other

women, and some successful women want to maintain their unique status at the expense of other women (Matthews in Coleman, 2007). Such gatekeeping is referred to as the "queen bee syndrome" (Ellemers et al., 2004).

Individual Factors That Influence Women against Leadership

According to Powell (2000), factors related to individual personality traits can act as barriers to women's career advancement. To have successful female leaders in a male-dominated culture, there is need to have women with academic and relational self-efficacy beliefs (Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016). These will enable the individuals to overcome hardships and to persist under adverse conditions in male-dominated work environments (Zeldin & Pajares, 2000). Self-efficacy belief is derived from social interactions with other members of the society and is critical to that individual's esteem and accomplishment (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2005). Taylor (2009) talked about the Imposter Phenomenon (IP), i.e. the internal experience in which the individual believed they were not bright despite being high achievers and of high intellect. Women are said to view themselves as 'impostors' (Clance & Imes, 1978). Furthermore, they are afraid of failure, and this may partly explain why some of them leave senior positions of leadership. In South Africa, Moorosi (2010) established that female principals found management stressful as they associated it with restrictiveness and inflexibility. Low self-esteem, lack of confidence, lack of motivation and

aspiration acted against women's success to leadership (Kagoda & Sperandio, 2009). Thus, they were victims of their personal beliefs and convictions, caught in "the prison of their minds" (Friedman, in Genz 2009). Rhodes et al. (2009) viewed self-confidence and self-belief as critical in the journey to leadership.

Theoretical Framework

Emotional Labour. This paper utilises the theory of emotional labour to understand the experiences of former female school principals. The rationale being that for those who work in school offices, the emotional labour related to both home and school is usually invisible, yet it can deplete the psychic reserves of the participants (Osgood, 2010). The theory of emotional labour originates from Hochschild's study of airline workers. Hochschild found that these employees utilised emotional resources to ensure the operation of the work environment. Hochschild established that aircrew had to continually deny and manage their own emotions to deal with the needs of the passengers (Thomson et al., 2007) and to please the customers. In the context of school leadership, the concept is applicable because school principals have to manage emotions as they deal with parents, colleagues and school children (Hebson et al., 2007).

Emotional labour can be as exhausting as physical labour because emotional labourers must surrender their hearts just as physical labourers surrender their bodies (Stenross & Klein in Mann, 2004). Mann

(1998 in Mann, 2004) established that emotional labour resulted in high-stress levels for the respondents. Hochschild (in Robson & Bailey, 2009) observed that it was women who specialised in emotional labour because of their social and political positioning which made them particularly vulnerable to pressures hence the preference of this theory in this study.

Hochschild (in Rodgers, 2010) explained that the needed to manage emotions to avoid distressing and uncomfortable sensations can be accompanied by emotional exhaustion, burnout, withdrawal and negative attitudes. This could result in, a feeling of being over-extended and having depleted one's emotional resources and one that may eventually lead to women leaving leadership (Chang, 2009).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This instrumental case study investigated reasons behind women leaving school leadership positions is qualitative in nature. It focused on the experiences of two South African women who were former school principals and who left their leadership positions for some reasons other than retirement. The instrumental case approach was utilised because it was viewed as an appropriate tool that would facilitate an understanding and possibly provide insights into the phenomenon under study (Mills et al., 2010). The qualitative approach which embraces an interpretative approach was chosen for the reason that it enabled the researchers to explore the lived experiences of the participants (Thuyle, 2011).

The participants were purposefully sampled firstly because of the nature of the study (Yin, 2011) which limited participation to females who had left their positions as principals of schools and secondly, because they were close, known to the researchers, and prepared to share their experiences. Views from the heads were elicited through the use of semi-structured, in-depth, face to face interviews because these enabled the researchers to probe on responses of significance. The interviews were piloted with two female colleagues. The actual interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researchers.

The data were manually categorised and analysed through the use of themes. Content analysis was utilised to interpret the data. Direct quotations from participants were used to present the data. This helped in producing credible and convincing data. Janesick (2004) argued that the use of narrative vignettes and quotations supported by comments help to convince the reader.

The study adhered to the ethical standards of Unisa as granted by the ethics committee at the University. Informed written consent was obtained from the participants. These were assured of confidentiality and anonymity of their identities. To cater for these aspects, pseudonyms were used. These ethical issues are critical for qualitative research (Kumar, 2005).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the cultural, social and

work practices that contributed to women leaving positions as school principals in South Africa.

Cultural and Social Practices That Contributed To Women Leaving Positions as School Principals

The narratives from the study indicated that the patriarchal perception of male as leader was the main contributor to females leaving leadership. Nobuhle commented that the local community and some of her male colleagues resisted her leadership as a woman. She had this to share;

> I have realised that people associate leadership with men. In my case, most parents would come and ask to speak to 'Mr' Nkomazulu when they knew the school was being led by a female. I would ask them Mr Nkomazulu in connection with what? They would say he is the school principal and I would say the principal is not a Mr it is a Mrs.

This signified that they expected to see a male figure as the principal and not a female. She cited an incident that occurred when she went to attend a workshop with other school principals.

> We were supposed to collect some items and take them to our schools. So when I went there, one of the gentlemen said, 'I said school principals. Are you a school principal?' I said why? What do you think? Ok, I am the principal so what? You keep on fighting, and I was already tired of preparing

myself up for a fight every day, but for men, it is smooth sailing.

In line with Nobuhle's observation, Monica observes that gender affected the way she was perceived as a school principal. She commented that although she had studied leadership and management and was pretty organised, her colleagues and parents could not believe that she could run the school. She said that some parents challenged her. In her case, the situation was worsened by the fact that her school was private and parents paid much money. They, therefore, expected her to perform miracles even with the children that were underperforming. She had this to share:

> They doubt that you are capable until you prove yourself. You do get this question what do you know what you are doing?

She added that sometimes she had to deal with aggressive and hostile parents.

> For example, I had a parent with a huge body who came and told me that 'Where I come from, people roll the red carpet …' I looked at him and thought now I need to change my strategy I need to remain a leader. Now how do you handle a man who is a man's men with this huge personality and huge expectations? She asked.

Similarly, Nobuhle explained that there were times when some parents created desolation for her. For example, she reported that:

Parents would take their children's work straight to the province complaining that teachers are not doing this and that, therefore the principal is not working. I realised that things were bad when I learned that the community was accusing me of incompetence simply because I had transferred my grandson to another school yet I had done that because I wanted him to grow and to be like other children.

There was a time when a group of some high school boys wanted to put Nobuhle's leadership to test. It was when school children were fighting for 'pass one pass all' that is; they wanted every student to be passed regardless of the performance. They forced her to close the school. Meanwhile, the teachers were watching from a distance to see what would happen. She stood her ground, and they went away only to come back a month later to apologise. They said, "Maam we thought you were going to be scared because you are a woman". She said the way she handled this situation earned her respect from her teachers and the school children.

The incidents cited above serve to illustrate how gender stereotypes can affect leadership perceptions. According to Maseko (2013), stereotypes often define roles that players enact. Furthermore, many of the roles that actors play are based on gendered differential expectations (Carter, 2014). In this case, women are least expected to be school principals and their leadership potential is doubted and is tested.

These findings seem to support Moorosi (2007) whose studies in South Africa established that the traditional stereotypes in that country associate school principalship with masculinity, and that this hampered women's career progression in educational management.

Monica raised a pertinent issue where respect was not guaranteed, but she had to prove her abilities to earn it. This point was demonstrated by Nobuhle who earned her respect through the way she handled a volatile situation which could otherwise had been explosive. Studies on female school principals by Coleman (2007) and Zikhali (2013) revealed that they had to prove their worth as leaders. According to Chipunza (2003), in general, women have to work twice as hard as their male counterparts to achieve the same level of recognition. Madden (2005) is of the view that living up to unrealistic expectations and invisibility can result in burnout or exhaustion. It is this exhaustion that can lead to women resigning from their positions as school principals.

Work Practices That Contributed To Women Leaving Positions as School Principals

Although South African policy guarantees equal treatment of everyone before the law, the reality of women principals' experiences suggests that women fight a constant battle against discrimination at the organisational level (Moorosi, 2007). Inandi (2009) said attitudes and prejudices formed the glass ceiling or barrier that prevented women from making progress in leadership. As earlier mentioned, the patriarchal attitudes

at a societal level also manifested at the workplace. Nobuhle explained that when she was appointed school principal, one of her male colleagues was extremely negative. He would criticise her left and right to the extent that she had to confront him one day. She said:

> I called him to my office and told him that, you know what, I realise there is animosity between the two of us. I heard from the corridors that the day I went to the interview you were saying 'Mrs Nkomazulu has gone to an interview and something within me tells me she is going to get that post and I am not prepared to be led by a woman.' You know what, this is high time that you changed your attitude and we work together. You were acting principal asking people to prepare and submit scheme books, but you do not want to submit. I told him on the face that you stop that or else I am going to take the correct procedures. That is when he became a little better.

Nobuhle further explained that apart from the teachers in general, some members of the school governing board (SGB) made her life miserable:

> We would plan or agree on something, and the following day things would change like nobody's business. You would see at the meeting that there had been caucuses before the meeting and nothing worked to the extent that I became stressed and that stress turned into depression. I went into depression, and I was hospitalised for six

weeks. After that, I got long leave. I was on leave for six months because of depression, so I resigned. While I was on leave, the chairperson would send me an email to say the SGB is complaining about this and that can you comment? I would look at it and keep quiet because how could I comment on something that we would have agreed on as a team?

Nobuhle explained that in staff meetings members of the SGB wanted to out-perform her. She said there was competition trying to show who knows what better to the extent that she could not trust any one of them. To make things worse, she could not report whatever she wanted to the district because one of the troublesome people was wife to the inspector at the district, so she had to keep everything to herself meanwhile it was killing her inside. As though that was not enough, she said:

> There were factions at the school because when I joined, the teachers were already there, so they had trust in the other person than in me because I was new so it was just not working for me.

The resistance of female leadership is well documented. Coleman (in Thuyle, 2011) argued that a male-dominated culture underpinning the socialisation process made women subordinates and men do not like to be led by women. A similar argument was raised by Chipunza (2003) who warned that male subordinates were sometimes unwilling to accept women authority and that some created undercurrents that undermined the authority of women heads. This was

evidenced by the caucuses and the bid to outshine her that Nobuhle experienced. As such, women are advised not to expect men to relinquish their power voluntarily, because the statement that a master should not serve under a mistress continues to hold true (Oram in Chipunza, 2003).

Nobuhle realised that some of her colleagues mistook her feminine qualities such as smiles for weakness. She cited her male deputy school principal who always criticised her smiles saying "Maam you are not firm, you must behave like a man." This finding is in line with Wrushmen and Sherman (in Zikhali, 2013) who suggested that a norm that was usually associated with leadership was that leadership style was masculine. However, the debate on whether women should adopt the feminine or masculine type of leadership is raging on. Historically, if women were to succeed in leadership, they had to adopt traditional masculine characteristics and align themselves with men (Kruse & Prettyman, 2008). On the contrary, when women adopt masculine models, they are seen to violate cultural norms of femininity and are likely to be evaluated negatively (Kruse & Prettyman, 2008).

Relationships at the Workplaces

According to the participants in this study, relationships and interactions at their workplaces were gendered in nature. Monica explained that there was the existence of men's clubs in which women were excluded. She narrated her first experience on being sent to a workshop as a school principle:

When I got there, I realised it was a man's world. These men were just networking, giving out their business cards. There were one or two women, but the majority was males. I felt like withdrawing because I thought it was ridiculous. The man would bring their authority into the conversation, and I had to stand my ground many a time. The male school principals formed their groupings where they shared notes, and you would not find female school principals included in them. As soon as a woman was included, their conversation and even their jokes changed.

To Monica, exclusion of females from male networks was a challenge. She also observed that women were excluded from individual committees:

I have noticed that there are those committees where women are not included. Men do not share their experiences as school principals with females. I found that as a woman you are indeed excluded.

Coronel et al. (2010) found that women faced career barriers such as tokenism, exclusion from informal networks and lacked of developmental opportunities. These findings are in line with Northouse (2010) who established that women were less likely to be included in crucial networks than their male counterparts. Male networks encourage and support men in leadership while women are left out. As a consequence,

exclusion of women from such social clubs and activities where essential networks are built and maintained are a challenge to women in leadership.

Individual Factors That Influence Women against the Leadership

The gender identity theory explains that one will behave according to the meanings they attach to their self-conception of gender and gender roles (Carter, 2014). To succeed in male-dominated cultures, women need to have academic and self-efficacy beliefs (Howe-Walsh & Turnbull 2016). Self-efficacy beliefs enable individuals to overcome hardships and to be persistent under adverse conditions (Zeldin & Pajares, in Howe-Walsh & Turnbull 2016). However, according to Nobuhle, there are times when this does not work. In her own words she summarised the reasons behind her resignation thus:

> I had a passion for leadership. The reason why I finally left is that I had lost hope in the system. I was pushing hard but nothing worked and if you keep on pushing and pushing and you are bumping your head against hard walls, what would you do? I finally said to myself, the reason why I am here is to serve, and I did not see myself serving. When I was trying my level best, people were relaxed, watching and I do have a belief that together we can make it. I knew that alone I could not so I found myself alone and helpless. I was lonely I was helpless

> I was a changed a person. Even at home, I was not talking any longer to my family members. I took the problems home, but my family was tired. They were like 'mama we do not want to hear about your school again. Talk about something else.' Then I lost interest. My passion became hatred. Today even if I pass by that school, it is as if I never worked there. I no longer have that passion for leading anymore.

Hobson (in Rhodes et al., 2009) emphasised the isolation and loneliness that females faced as leaders. Nobuhle said that her solitude was further promoted by lack of female mentors and family support. Moorosi (2010) found that women in management in South Africa lacked mentors and support from their families and their female colleagues. Chang (2009) commented that lack of such social support could be a source of burnout or exhaustion.

On a positive note, Monica did not resign because of the challenges that she encountered. She said she wanted to upgrade herself because she realised that academically she was at the same level with her colleagues, so she wanted to empower herself by studying for her doctorate.

CONCLUSION

This study established that female school principals in the Gauteng Province in South Africa resigned from their positions as school principals because of individual, social and work-related reasons. Insidious, subtle discriminatory gender-related

practices and barriers that worked against the leadership of women were established. These barriers were mainly as a result of patriarchal practices that despised the leadership of women. Patriarchal attitudes manifested in the rejection of female school principals' leadership, authority and lack of support from colleagues at the workplace, lack of role models, isolation, discrimination, and loneliness. Regrettably, these barriers were the same as those that contributed to the underrepresentation of females from positions of leadership as reviewed in the literature review. At an individual level, one of the school principals felt that she could not stand the treatment she was receiving from both her colleagues and the community. The other one resigned on the realisation that she needed to empower herself. She wanted to pursue her doctoral studies.

The study recommends a change of attitudes regarding leadership perception by individuals, society and organisations. Since leadership perception is engrained in patriarchal attitudes, this ideology needs to be tackled from many angles. This may include the government working in collaboration with civil and non-governmental organisations, churches, the family and the school to support women in leadership. The challenge, however, is that most of the people in leadership in these circles are males who were socialised in this ideology and may not be willing to hand over power to women. Hence it would be tantamount to have a system fight against itself. However, change never comes on a silver plate thus this change of attitude has to be fought for. Women are urged to cling on to their positions if they get an opportunity. It is recommended that more women should apply for positions as school principals. This will increase not only the number of women in leadership but will add to the pool of female mentors as well.

While the findings of this study are useful in providing insights; the sample is too small for generalisability hence it is recommended that future researchers could conduct large-scale research on this aspect. Further research could also investigate attrition of male principals and the reasons behind it and possibly compare these with those of females'.

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