A Sociocultural Position of Women in Leadership: Reflections from Four School Principals' Lived Vulnerable Experiences

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ABSTRACT

This article investigated the dynamic interaction between the leadership styles of four school principals, their vulnerability, and the interconnected relationships they share. Traditionally, patriarchal social expectations have compelled women to prioritise family responsibilities, often in tension with their career pursuits. This study investigates how women in leadership effectively lead schools despite facing their vulnerable position. In the 21st century, women leaders face challenging management duties. They have stakeholders who regard them as ignorant of leadership matters. Social role theory was applied to foreground this study. The social role theory widely highlights how gender stereotypes are often linked to the gender division of labour that characterised patriarchal society. Coupled with the theory mentioned above, a qualitative interpretive paradigm with phenomenology as a framework enhanced this mode of inquiry, and through individual face-to-face interviews, this paper explored the lived experiences of female school principals. Thematic analysis of the data revealed the resilience of these school principals and the empowerment potential of vulnerability as a management and coping strategy. This paper also offers practical solutions based on the implications of being a woman regarding the vulnerable identity within the leadership role in education spaces.

KEYWORDS

School women leadership; gender discrimination; gender bias; resilience; vulnerability; social role theory.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

More than half of the world's population are women, yet they often face gender discrimination in various aspects of their lives (Glazebrook, Noll & Opoku, 2020). For example, a female principal may face scepticism from staff, parents, and even students who question her ability to manage the school effectively. This scepticism often stems from deep-seated biases that perceive leadership as male dominated. The Gender and Women's Mental Health Report of 2019, as cited by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2019), attributes this discriminatory behaviour to social constructs rather than biological differences. Myende and Nhlumayo (2022) contend that these societal discriminatory tendencies have an adverse effect on women in school leadership positions. The Personnel Administrative Measure (PAM) 1998 expects school principals to interact with various stakeholders to ensure effective school management (DBE, 1999). However, these expectations are particularly challenging for women in leadership roles, who face discrimination and doubts about their capabilities solely based on their gender. This scepticism is often not based on their actual performance but instead on the prejudiced belief that leadership is inherently a male domain. Such biases can limit their opportunities for professional growth, hinder their ability to implement effective school management strategies, and negatively impact the school environment. Furthermore, navigating such discriminatory circumstances can be exhausting for women in school leadership positions (Erskine et al., 2021; Zorba, 2022), hindering efforts to create inclusive and equitable workplace environments. This discrimination is perpetuated in a larger society, where women are excluded from decision-making even on issues that pertain to their lives. In many organisations, women are often excluded from high-level decision-making processes, particularly when formulating policies that directly affect their working conditions, such as birth-related leave, flexible working hours, or workplace harassment protocols. Despite these issues being highly relevant to their lives, decisions are frequently made by male leadership teams, resulting in policies that may not fully address or prioritise the needs of women.

Given this context, understanding women's experiences is crucial to developing strategies to support women in leadership roles. Therefore, this article focuses on the strategies women in school leadership positions must employ to survive the societal perceptions that often challenge them. These challenges include the unequal distribution of household labour, where women are expected to excel in all spheres of their lives despite equal participation in the workforce (Alon et al., 2020; Madela et al., 2024; Power, 2020). Furthermore, discriminatory practices, tokenism, and intersectional biases further impede women's progress in educational leadership roles (Cruz-González et al., 2021; Hill et al., 2016; Kelly et al., 2021; Nhlumayo & Nkosi, 2024; Putri et al., 2024). Despite their qualifications and proven record, they are sidelined in prominent leadership roles and decision-making. They are subjected to microaggressions, such as being interrupted or dismissing their ideas until a male colleague reiterates them. Furthermore, informal rules and societal norms reinforce gender disparities, leading to the under-representation of women in school leadership (Erikson & Verge, 2022). These obstacles

are rooted in societal norms and established patriarchal systems (Alon et al.,2020). Consequently, the existence of these discriminatory practices requires intensive strategies to challenge stereotypes and empower women in educational leadership roles, which is the focus of this article.

Problem Statement

Women frequently face gender discrimination, a phenomenon that is socially constructed rather than biological (WHO, 2019). Women subjected to such discrimination are often at risk of developing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019). In the context of school leadership, the Personnel Administrative Measure (PAM) of 1998 requires that school principals engage with various stakeholders to ensure effective management (DBE, 1999). However, female school principals often encounter social biases that question their leadership skills, leading to stress, health risks, and potential professional setbacks (Erskine et al., 2021). These challenges undermine efforts to achieve an inclusive and equitable work environment. This research explores women's lived experiences in school leadership positions, focusing on how they navigate these challenges that conflict with their gender identity.

Research question

This paper responded to the following question:

What strategies do women use to cope with societal patriarchal bias and negative perceptions against their identity as school leaders?

Review of related literature

This article reviewed the literature on several key themes: women's experiences in leadership, the challenges women face in school leadership, the legal framework on gender equity, and the strategies women in leadership use to combat discrimination. These strategies include acknowledging and embracing vulnerability and implementing resilience-based leadership approaches. The topics are discussed to shed light on women's challenges in the education sector.

Experiences of women in leadership positions

Efforts to address gender inequality have gained global momentum since the inception of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995, particularly in the last decade, with increased attention and focus from international organisations and leaders (ILO, 2022; IPU, 2022b; UN Women, 2021; WEF, 2022). However, these efforts face various obstacles, including cultural, economic, and political barriers, alongside natural disasters, which complicate the pursuit of gender equality. Alon et al. (2020) analyse current gender inequality stemming from the *unequal distribution of household labour*. Despite equal participation in the workforce, women still bear a disproportionate burden of household labour. These tasks somehow satisfy women in general; however, they diminish their productivity at work (Power, 2020). This means that women are disempowered from a societal point of view and need redress.

In addition, in most *patriarchal-dominated societies,* women's household identities tend to penetrate the workplace often. From a young age, in these contexts, women are socialised

as inferior to men and made to believe in family needs (Bay, 2019). Alon et al. (2020) propose a change of social norms to alleviate discrimination against women in leadership spheres. Furthermore, Ortner, (2022). agree that the patriarchal system has created the male superiority complex. Consequently, women find it challenging to balance their work-family life, and as a result, they are under-represented in school leadership positions (DeSimone, 2020). This is also experienced by women who are members of parliament (MP), as Fokum, Fonjong, and Adams (2020) observed that women must navigate gendered candidate selection procedures. This impedes the ability of women MPs to advance gender equity legislation. Women are expected to conform to traditional gender roles, avoiding what might be perceived as assertive behaviour. Otherwise, they face *physical and psychological violence* as a punitive measure for breaking gender roles (Berry et al., 2021).

In South Africa, the ruling party's increasingly centralised nature restricts women MPs' ability to use their numbers to collaborate on women's rights legislation (Clayton & Zetterberg, 2021). Rules may be 'gender neutral' but produce 'gendered effects' that favour men due to their interaction with more comprehensive social norms (Lowndes, 2020, p. 545). As a result, this negatively affects women in school management. Through interviews and observations, Mashiane (2022) examined the conflict roles, challenges, and experiences of six women in school leadership positions. The study affirms that unequal division of household labour, the balance between work and family life, and experiences of physical and psychological violence contribute significantly to the challenges faced by women in school leadership roles

Challenges of women in school leadership positions

Women in educational leadership are constantly challenged to prove that their success is justly due, not the result of affirmative action or the opportunity to become gender identity (Baxter-Nuamah, 2015). The challenge of gender role allocation in societies, where men are perceived as agentic and women as passive and supportive, persists globally, affecting various domains such as corporate boards, education, and parliamentary workplaces (Erikson & Verge, 2022). This social pattern often forces women to adapt their leadership styles to conform to these expected social norms (Nielson et al., 2020). The belief that men are inherently better suited for leadership further hinders women's ability to fulfil their leadership responsibilities (Zayer et al., 2020), intensifying pressure to conform (Cruz-González et al., 2021).

As women navigate their leadership identity in male-dominated spaces, they face several discriminatory practices based on other salient factors like age, race, religion, etc., which may be used against women in school leadership. However, this article explores gender as a discriminatory factor in the way they navigate leadership roles in school settings. The overlap or interaction of the various categories of identity discrimination is referred to as intersectionality (Rogers & Syed,2021). Studies have found that the intersection of these forms of discrimination in the workplace can result in biases that limit women's ascension into leadership (Holman & Walker, 2021; Bonner, 2023; Skouteris et al., 2024). This gender stereotype significantly impacts the performance of women in leadership roles, leading to

feelings of tokenism and psychological distress (Hill et al., 2016). Research-intensive institutions such as the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Kentucky have been notorious for creating environments where people of colour, specifically women, have extreme difficulty feeling accepted (Kelly et al., 2021). Tokenism affects their recommendations during promotional processes, as stakeholders like teacher unions and school governing bodies tend to associate leadership with masculine traits (Schmidt & Mestry, 2015).

On the one hand, women in school leadership roles face scrutiny from different stakeholders as they are perceived to prioritise family over work responsibilities. On the other hand, the same stakeholders criticise women for neglecting family to focus on work; this is a clandestine strategy to frustrate these women in leadership positions. Acker (2006) asserts that stakeholders' strategies perpetuate traditional gender norms. Women's transition from traditional domestic roles to leadership positions involves a change in identity, further complicating matters (Ibarra, 2023).

In addition to these societal challenges, entrenched patriarchal systems further impede women's progress in leadership roles, particularly in educational settings, which is the context of this study (Kutu, 2020). These further contribute to the systemic discrimination that persists and affects women's performance and opportunities for advancement (Fasanmi & Seyama, 2024; Schmidt & Mestry, 2015). Obstacles such as the glass ceiling, isolation, marginalisation, and insubordination perpetuate women's exclusion from professional networks and organisational support (Faulkner, 2015). These challenges are not limited to national boundaries, as women in various countries face similar barriers due to cultural expectations and gender biases (Berry et al., 2020; Yildirim et al.,2021). However, based on societal factors such as violence against women in society, South Africa has topped the charts in terms of unfair and discriminatory practices propagated against them.

Legal frameworks on gender equity

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act 108 of 1996) stipulates the rights and respect for all citizens irrespective of race, gender class, age, disability and any other forms of discrimination in Section 9 (2) of the Bill of Rights. Achievement of gender equity is supported by an institutional framework of policies that include the National Gender Policy Framework and a Ministry of Women, Children and People with Disabilities. This legislative framework aims to mitigate gender-discriminatory practices in educational institutions, but the discrimination of women in school leadership is still rife. While the legislative framework aims to promote gender equality, informal rules and societal norms reinforce gender disparities, necessitating intensive efforts to challenge stereotypes and empower women in school leadership roles (Erikson & Verge, 2022). In addition to the external forces of a hostile environment of society (Alexander-Lee, 2014), some women are challenged by internal struggles, such as confidence issues and the queen bee syndrome, when women look down upon other women, worsening these challenges (Derks et al., 2016). These internal struggles prevent women from occupying positions of authority within the school. This results in the under-representation of women in leadership

positions within the education sector. It is against these challenges that this paper aims to propose strategies to mitigate gender discrimination against women in school leadership, as discussed in the following section.

Strategies to mitigate gender discrimination of women in school leadership

Mitigating gender discrimination against women in school leadership requires a multifaceted approach that empowers women leaders to draw strength from their experiences. By integrating strategies, women in school leadership can draw strength from their experiences, be empowered through vulnerability, and grow resilience to lead effectively, even in the face of gender discrimination. These efforts empower individual leaders and contribute to broader systemic change that promotes gender equity in education.

Acknowledging and embracing vulnerability

Sara Withers (2012) reviewed Brené Brown's book "Daring Greatly" and concluded that vulnerability is not a weakness but rather a strategy of profound courage in school leadership. She challenges the common avoidance of vulnerability among leaders (Withers, 2012). Drawing from Brene's 12 years of research, she contends that embracing vulnerability can profoundly transform our lives, relationships, parenting, and leadership (Brown, 2015). Throughout the book, Brown explores social issues such as shame, comparison, and disengagement, offering insightful analysis of Withers (2012). The review highlights the importance of leaders who embrace vulnerability to foster creativity, collaboration, and resilience. Berkes' study on uncertainty and vulnerability advises on the importance of creating safe spaces for vulnerability, which can enhance creativity and resilience within women leaders in their organisations (Berkes, 2007). She asserts that vulnerability must be appropriately managed to avoid negative consequences. This is especially true with the stakeholders and society in the education sector since the ability to innovate depends on their willingness to embrace women school leaders' vulnerability and act on their values (Berkes, 2007; Makura, 2022).

Sesana et al. 2020 and Lawton-Misra & Pretorius (2021) indicate the role of vulnerability in interventions to improve the resilience and emotional intelligence of school women's leaders (Lawton-Misra & Pretorius, 2021; Sesana et al., 2020). Furthermore, as Clare discussed (2018), authentic school leadership involves accepting vulnerabilities, taking risks, and fostering a culture of creativity and learning (Clare, 2018), particularly in gender-cultural societies where traditional gender norms persist, and women's identity is often deemed incompatible with leadership roles.

Resilience leadership strategy

Despite enduring challenges, women have persistently pursued leadership success in all industries (Chance, 2022). Chance's research delved into the experiences of nine black women occupying leadership roles in higher education. The findings of the participant narratives and the existing literature highlighted that women in leadership positions perceive challenges as avenues for personal and professional growth. They emphasised resilience as a driving force, drawing on familial support, mentorship, community support, and a solid connection to cultural

identity and diversity. Additionally, Bodalina and Mestry (2022) shed light on the strengths exhibited by women leaders, particularly their resilience, which contributes to their effectiveness as leaders. Similarly, Hanmer and Klugman (2016) agree that women's agency demonstrated through resilience and tenacity enhances their prospects for excelling in leadership roles and enables them to withstand the challenges they often encounter. This study acknowledges that these challenges expose women to vulnerable circumstances.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is underpinned by Eagly and Wood (1991) social role theory, which argues that societal norms and expectations shape people's behaviours and perceptions in line with their gender roles. Culture-defined gender roles encompass behaviours, attitudes, and traits associated with gender, that significantly impact women's lives, including their leadership styles and how society perceives their competence. These gender roles, acquired through socialisation processes and patriarchal societies, emphasise the division of labour amongst genders. This division of labour detrimentally affects women's identities in leadership roles and influences the perception of leadership effectiveness; for instance, masculine characteristics are often linked with effective leadership, while women are expected to display feminine characteristics often associated with being subordinate to male leadership (Alkathiri et al., 2024; Ortega-Sánchez & Heras-Sevilla, 2023). Society discriminates against women in leadership, as some men still dominate the recruitment process in most educational institutions and believe women are being favoured due to recent equity policies (Bodalina & Mestry, 2022). The Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities in Beijing +25 South Africa's Report on Progress Made on Implementing the Beijing Platform for Action 2014–2019 indicated that assigning gender roles suggests that women can only excel in positions that align with traditional expectations. Additionally, gender identities and labels are used to reinforce women's submissiveness. This contributes to workplace discrimination and some traditional-minded men resisting women's authority. Despite these obstacles hindering women's career advancement, they often conform to these norms to preserve their social standing, even at the cost of their careers, especially in developing nations. The social role theory acknowledges the discrimination of women due to their gender. However, in this article, it is women in school leadership who are discriminated against because of their gender and how it relates to their positionality in leadership school environments.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employed an interpretive qualitative paradigm to explore the lived experiences of women principals within a patriarchal context, highlighting societal biases and historical beliefs that challenge women's suitability for leadership roles. This article adopted a phenomenological approach as a mode of inquiry with four primary school women principals in a selected district of education in South Africa. The participants were all assigned pseudonyms, respectively, and

purposefully sampled with women with more than three years of experience as principals. However, this article reports on four school principals in which resilience and vulnerability were developed from data analysis. The schools are located in a semi-urban township with a hundred per cent black student enrolment. This was a good site for this study to develop a qualitative understanding of the lives of women school principals. Data were generated through individual face-to-face interviews with four women principals. The semi-structured interview questions were open-ended, which allowed the participants to respond freely to the questions. The research ethics were followed, including sourcing ethical clearance from the institution, permission from the district and the school, and consent from the participants. The four school principals were chosen purposefully based on their gender, positions, and the aim of this article. They were the appropriate participants to answer the interview questions. Data were analysed thematically, following coding, categorising, and developing themes (Braune & Clark, 2006; Peel, 2020). The thematic analysis became useful in this study because it allowed me to understand the resilience of women's principles and vulnerability as a powerful coping strategy in leadership.

Table 1.

Demographic analysis of the research participants and research sites

Participants and research site	Number of teachers in the school	Highest Qualification	Years of experience in principalship	Age	Marital status
Principal A School A	40	M.Ed.	25	51	M
Principal B School B	25	B.Ed. Hons	10	38	M
Principal C School C	45	M.Ed.	20	50	M
Principal D School D	30	M.Ed.	13	42	M

Keys: M.Ed. – Master of Education, B.Ed. Hons – Bachelor of Education Honours, M-married
Table 1 indicates a summary of the profiles and research sites of the participants.

The four primary schools are located in one semi-urban education district. They have been purposively selected since they are all headed by women principals. It should be noted that pseudonyms were used in this paper to facilitate the easy identification of participants and research sites.

FINDINGS

The data results revealed three themes: vulnerability, resilient leadership, and policy implementation. These are the strategies that women in school leadership use to cope with gender discrimination at work. From the participants' voices, the data showed that these are survival strategies to avoid negative social influence on their leadership. These emerging themes are presented in the following sections.

Vulnerability

The data showed that the participants accepted being vulnerable to the circumstances to survive. This is evident in the words of PA; this was her view:

I allow myself to be vulnerable and treat my staff like my family because I get the opportunity to know what they think. **PA**

Reflecting the view of AP, displaying feminine traits as an approach to leadership helps women cope with hostile situations that attempt to thrive against their gender identity. PB shared the following sentiments:

I treat them like how a mother treats her children, though this acts against policy. **PB**

In the view of PC, the societal stereotype of labour division that analyses women as less leaders than men seem to be exposing women to unfavourable situations that act against their gender identity. On one hand, women are expected to downplay their positions of authority and display their feminine traits; on the other hand, they have to imitate their male counterparts to survive as mentioned in the words of PC:

They expect me to behave like a man. **PC**

This indicates the contradictory behaviour that society expects from school principals. Moreover, it will still take a long time for society to welcome women as leaders. Hence, they must work triple as hard to prove themselves as capable leaders at home, school, etc. to be accepted in society as uttered in the words of PD, below:

I constantly have to prove to other people that I am capable. **PD**

The data suggest that women in school leadership roles often use their vulnerability experiences strategically to navigate gender discrimination. They employ feminine characteristics and approach staff interactions similar to managing families, intending to succeed in their leadership roles. This strategy fosters teamwork, collaboration, and an open-door policy that aligns with the school vision and mission. However, it has a negative effect on school women managers, as they are expected to act like someone else. For this reason, Brown (2015) argues that embracing vulnerability can lead to successful leadership, particularly in gender-cultural societies, but it requires careful management to avoid negative consequences. Women leaders create boundaries around vulnerability, demanding professionalism, correcting practices that act against policies, and resisting discrimination while utilising education departmental policies as a strategy. These findings support Withers's (2012) analysis of Brown's (2015) work, challenging the view that vulnerability is inherently negative. Further research by Sesana et al. (2020), Lawton-Misra and Pretorius (2021), and Bodalina and Mestry (2022)

indicates that embracing vulnerability strengthens resilience, identity, and emotional intelligence among school women leaders. However, the societal acceptance of women in leadership roles remains a distant goal, as women constantly face the burden of proving their competence while balancing multiple roles. Despite these challenges, women acknowledge their vulnerability as a survival mechanism, using feminine traits as a resilient leadership approach to navigate hostile situations and challenge gender stereotypes, as presented in the following section.

Resilient leadership

One of the responsibilities of leaders is to detect potential threats in their institution and to remain one step ahead or to build resilience in the face of danger. The data indicates that school leaders were not timid in making unpopular decisions. They tended to be dynamic in ensuring tasks were done, had a strong social commitment, and were determined to lead schools successfully. This was revealed in the words of PA:

I now force my teachers to do their work at school before they leave. **PA**

In this case, school women leaders showed initiative, tenacity, and dedication to upholding high standards and achieving success. They did not hesitate to act decisively to secure the success and well-being of the institution, even if it meant making unpopular decisions to show their determination as PB mentioned:

…some teachers thought I could not cope, and this made me more determined. **PB**

This talk also discussed the importance of continuous learning, resilience, firmness, and assertiveness in the leadership style of school leaders. They empower themselves through knowledge and assert their authority confidently to maintain effective leadership roles.

I make sure that they know I am the principal. **PC**

Similarly, PD demonstrated resilience by maintaining an optimistic attitude and exhibiting strong character in her approach, challenging the prevailing notion that women are weak and unsuitable for leadership roles. This approach contributes to women's confidence and earning respect in their leadership positions. This is evident in the words of PD:

At times they think they are issues I cannot handle; I am stronger than they think **PD.**

The data findings denote school leaders who take advantage of resilient leadership qualities through initiative-taking measures, firm decision-making, and a commitment to maintaining high values. They are not afraid to make unpopular decisions when speaking to educators and parents while maintaining their feminine identity. This shows a decisive approach to addressing challenges while maintaining the dual identity of being a woman and a leader. They performed their school leadership roles and secured the success and well-being of the staff, learners, school governing bodies, and everyone they interacted with, which is associated with the mother's role. Additionally, they ensure that tasks are completed, and standards are upheld, reflecting a firm leadership style that maintains discipline and order. Furthermore, knowledge of school policies empowers them to make informed decisions and assert their authority confidently. Their optimistic character further bolsters this confidence as they resist

gender stereotypes and challenges, asserting their strength and capability. When used by women, the resilient leadership style threatens the notions of the social role theory that advocate the assignment of roles based on the individual's gender. The data calls attention to the importance of resilient leadership in the school context, where policies guide informed decision-making and effective responses to evolving realities as an effective strategy. As discussed in the subsequent section, exercising resilient leadership requires strict adherence to policy implementation.

Policy Implementation

The implementation of policies is a crucial aspect of leadership within institutions that guides informed decision making. However, policies serve a dual purpose for women in school leadership positions. They guide decision-making and act as a strategy for social justice and corrective measures that help them navigate situations that challenge their identity as women while leading schools, as PA declares.

I use policy to correct things at school, whether teachers like it or not. **PA**

Such a discourse asserts the authority of women school leaders and challenges any attempts to undermine their leadership based on gender. This assertiveness also serves as a means to ensure that educators respect them and avoid challenges to their leadership identity. As PB expressed her feelings about policy implementation as follows:

I know the curriculum and policies when I speak, I speak from a knowing position. **PB**

This account reflects this approach as an essential strategy for women leaders to gain the trust and respect of educators and stakeholders. It also better equips them to navigate negative challenges that tend to take advantage of their feminine character. This is evident in the words of PC:

I issue leave forms irrespective of the situation. **PC**

This indicates that the consistency and adherence of women's school leaders to procedures ensure that staff members can access their entitlements efficiently and with responsibility. For example, they were expected to understand, and not issue leave forms when an educator's child is sick. This is because they are also mothers, and they know what it is like to have a sick child. However, the participant's commitment to being firm in implementing school policies reflects their commitment to upholding institutional standards and effectiveness. To add on, PD said:

I survive through implementing policies every day; I have no choice. **PD**

These findings point to implementing policies as another strategy, as the four school leaders confirmed using policies to correct issues at school. This indicates the assertiveness of school leaders and women and their resistance to gender-based challenges to their authority. The strategy enables school leaders to navigate challenges that appear to exploit their feminine character. This behaviour results from how society believes that women are less of leaders, as alluded to in the social role theory. Despite their personal experiences, such as being mothers themselves, women school leaders remain resolute in implementing policies, ensuring fairness

and efficiency. Therefore, implementing policies serves as a tool for guiding decisions and a strategic means for women leaders to assert authority, gain respect, and maintain institutional integrity in the face of gender-based challenges.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The data findings revealed three key themes: vulnerability, resilient leadership, and policy implementation. These themes represent strategies used by women in leadership positions in schools to deal with discrimination based on gender. These themes emerged as survival strategies to counteract negative societal influences on women's leadership.

Women acknowledge and accept vulnerability to successfully manage schools as a crucial strategy. The strategy of treating educators, learners, parents, school governing bodies, union members, and all other stakeholders like family to listen to their viewpoints is an example of acceptance. The importance of exhibiting feminine traits as a leadership strategy helps deal with difficult circumstances and dispel gender preconceptions. For example, when society expects women leaders to act more like men, the assumption is that there is still work to be done before society accepts women in leadership roles. Despite these barriers, women leaders deliberately use vulnerability to promote cooperation and teamwork, which is consistent with schools' vision and mission statement. This strategy, which is supported by Brown (2015), highlights the need to create boundaries to prevent negative expectations caused by the division of labour based on gender as determined in the theory of social roles.

Resilient leadership emerged as another significant theme, highlighting the proactive and resolute approach women use in their school leadership roles. This is indicated through initiative, perseverance, and dedication to maintaining high standards, even when making difficult decisions. Strong social commitment and assertiveness ensure that tasks are completed, and standards are upheld, aligning with a mother's role of nurturing and maintaining order. The resilient leadership approach enables women leaders to maintain discipline and order while ensuring the success and well-being of their institutions. Furthermore, through resilient and confident leadership and self-empowerment, women in school leadership can defy discrimination and gender stereotypes by applying policy in decision-making.

Implementing policies has emerged as a fundamental strategy for women leaders to assert authority and navigate challenges related to gender discrimination within schools. Policies serve as a two-fold instrument that assists in directing choices while also enacting social justice and corrective action. Policies serve as a dual-purpose tool, guiding decision-making and acting as a means of social justice. Therefore, policy implementation guides decisions and serves as a strategic means for women in school leadership positions to assert authority, gain respect and maintain institutional integrity despite gender-based challenges.

Implications for practice and future research

The findings of this study offer important implications for school leadership practice, especially for women in school leadership positions. Firstly, it highlights the importance of embracing

vulnerability and intersectionality as hallmarks that women and other stakeholders need to embrace. These concepts should be welcomed and promoted in school settings, especially for female leaders, as this promotes cooperation, open communication, and teamwork. Fostering a culture of open communication, treating staff members as family, and exhibiting empathy can help leaders in the school community establish strong relationships and trust. Secondly, the study focuses on the need for resilient leadership development. The goal of professional development programmes and training courses should be to give leaders the tools they need to face obstacles head-on and persevere in maintaining high standards in the face of difficulty. Male leaders should be prepared to make unpopular decisions when necessary and maintain a strong social commitment to the success and well-being of the institution. In addition, the study stresses the importance of the implementation of assertive policies. Women leaders should be confident in implementing policies supporting institutional standards and challenging gender-based discrimination. Although some policies aim to empower women, some areas still need better formulation and development for practice. This will ensure a confident assertion of authority, fairness, and efficiency in policy implementation. Training programmes can guide the approach to challenges related to policy implementation and the development of assertive leadership skills.

Lastly, schools should adopt gender-inclusive leadership practices that recognise and value women leaders' diverse leadership styles and perspectives. This includes creating opportunities for women to demonstrate leadership skills, challenging gender stereotypes, and promoting a culture of respect and equality within the school community. The recommendations and lessons learnt from this study can help create environments that support the success and advancement of women leaders while promoting gender equality and diversity in educational leadership.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study shed light on three key themes: vulnerability, resilient leadership, and policy implementation, which women in school leadership positions use to navigate gender discrimination in their roles. These themes emerged as survival strategies to counteract negative societal influences on their leadership. Vulnerability was observed as participants accepted susceptibility to circumstances, facilitating open communication and teamwork, similar to family relationships. Resilient leadership emerged as leaders demonstrated initiative, perseverance, and dedication to maintaining high standards despite challenges. The implementation of policies also played a crucial role, serving as a tool for guiding decisions and asserting authority while addressing gender-based discrimination. Women leaders adeptly balanced assertiveness with empathy, defying stereotypes, and fostering inclusive environments within their schools.

The findings suggest implications for practice in school leadership. First, embracing vulnerability as a strength fosters collaboration and open communication, creating strong

relationships within the school community. Resilient leadership development programmes should equip leaders with the skills to navigate challenges and maintain high standards despite adversity. Furthermore, implementing assertive policies is crucial, requiring thorough understanding and a confident assertion of policies to uphold institutional standards. Lastly, educational institutions must adopt gender-inclusive leadership practices to support the success and advancement of women leaders while promoting diversity and equality. By implementing these recommendations, schools can cultivate environments supporting women leaders' success while promoting inclusivity and equality in educational leadership. This study contributes to a better understanding of the challenges faced by women leaders and offers practical insights to foster their success in school leadership roles.

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