

Crossing The Bridge to Leadership: A South African Experience of Female Principals to Secondary School Leadership

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ABSTRACT

A democratic South Africa assured equality to all individuals irrespective of gender, religion, beliefs, or race. Nonetheless, women's representation in leadership roles remains unequal compared to men, particularly in the secondary school landscape. The study used a qualitative research approach, through semi-structured interviews, and respondents were selected through the purposive sampling technique. The study findings revealed that entrenched gender stereotypes, insufficient mentorship, and political and union biases significantly hinder women's career advancement in principalship positions. Despite possessing the necessary qualifications and skills, female principals often confront biases that question their competence and authority. This paper recommended that there is a need for systemic reforms to address these barriers, promote fair and merit-based selection processes, and establish supportive networks for female educators. The findings of this study contribute to the discourse on gender equality in educational leadership and inform initiatives aimed at promoting the advancement of women in South African secondary school leadership roles.

KEYWORDS

Leadership; female; school leadership; principals.

INTRODUCTION

Despite concerted efforts to promote gender equality in leadership roles, South African secondary schools continue to witness a stark underrepresentation of female principals. This persistent gender disparity raises concerns about the inclusivity and diversity of leadership within the educational system. The lack of female representation in principalship positions not only reflects systemic barriers, but also hinders the development of role models for aspiring female leaders (Moorosi et al., 2020). Moreover, it perpetuates a narrative of inequality and reinforces gender stereotypes within the educational sphere. Addressing this issue is crucial not only for achieving gender parity but also for fostering a more inclusive and equitable educational environment. Therefore, this study aims to explore the experiences of female principals in South African secondary schools, with the overarching goal of identifying strategies to promote gender diversity and empower women in educational leadership roles. Gender equality in leadership positions is an important mechanism for involving people of both genders in educational institutions and other spheres of life. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in women's representation in managerial roles in the workplace (Dula, 2018). Despite these increases, women continue to face substantial barriers and challenges in accessing senior leadership positions in the educational domain (Madelo et al., 2024; Mbepera, 2017). Studies have revealed that in the workplace, women have less status, less freedom, and less influence compared to men, and their possibility of being elevated is not equal to that of men who have similar education and social standing (Addi-Racah & Ayalon, 2002; Chabaya et al., 2009). In numerous nations, such as the United States, Australia, and England, the ratio of female teachers to male teachers is relatively high. However, women are comparatively underrepresented in administrative roles within the educational sector (Addi-Racah & Ayalon, 2002; Nhlumayo & Nkosi, 2024). More of these managerial roles, such as supervision, and posts such as heads of local educational departments, and higher school principals, are given to men for executing responsibilities compared to women, who are mainly promoted to lower positions within educational institutions (Addi-Racah & Ayalon, 2002). In addition, the elevation of women and men unveils notable differences. Male teachers obtain their administrative experiences via various managerial experiences, such as being vice principals, compared to female teachers who gain managerial expertise through pedagogical responsibilities like counselling, and they tend to dedicate more time to intermediate positions (Addi-Racah & Ayalon, 2002; Shauman, 2016). The underrepresentation of women in schools' administrative positions is a complex issue caused by various administrative, individual, and socio-cultural factors that can lead to various types of discrimination (Gabaldon et al., 2016). The combination of these factors creates significant barriers to women's advancement in school administrative positions, perpetuating their underrepresentation in leadership roles. Regarding administrative factors, appointment procedures and administrative issues are among the major influencing factors for females' limited access to senior leadership hierarchies within and outside the education sector (Nyoni & He, 2019). These factors collectively contribute to the limited access

women have to senior leadership positions. These also lead to a preference for male candidates even if women are equally or more qualified. Sanderson and Whitehead (2016) claim that organisational internal appointments and promotion procedures are normally conducted by the male gender and made available to the same sex, thus causing women limited representation in senior leadership positions despite the higher levels of education they attained. This happens because of the lack of support from the administrators because of rigid protocols and procedures, complicated processes of promotions within the organisations, inadequate training resources, and insufficient policies to empower women, inflexibility, as well as limited prospects for women's career growth (Nyoni & He, 2019; Sanderson & Whitehead, 2016). Women often have fewer opportunities for professional development and training that are critical for career advancement. Without access to these resources, women lack the necessary skills or experience deemed essential for senior roles.

Unfair appointment practices are seen as a significant barrier to female educators being appointed to principal positions in secondary schools. Malahlela (2017) highlighted that the unfair practices by panellists' during candidate selection based on political affiliations contribute to the underrepresentation of female educators in these roles. The lack of transparency in the shortlisting and interview processes is evident. Bayeni and Bhengu (2015) argue that the attitudes of some panelists during these stages leave much to be desired. Despite women constituting the majority in the education sector, senior positions like principalships remain predominantly male due to these biased appointment practices in the selection and appointment process. The absence of support and mentorship for women aspiring to leadership roles greatly impedes their career progression. Davis (2012) and Pruitt (2015) emphasise that the lack of structured support and mentorship programmes leaves women without the essential guidance and encouragement needed to overcome leadership challenges. According to Davis (2012), women have the capability and potential to be effective leaders, yet they often receive less and less effective support, mentorship, sponsorship, and networking opportunities compared to their male counterparts. This disparity in support mechanisms significantly contributes to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. Despite having equal potential and leadership abilities as men, these differences in support, mentorship, sponsorship, and networking create substantial barriers to women's advancement (Dyantyi, 2024).

Despite notable progress over the past few decades, women remain underrepresented even in other sectors, worldwide. Ehrhart (2023) asserts that even when women attain political decision-making roles, such as being political leaders or cabinet members, gendered barriers persist. Women leaders often face stereotypes and biases that question their competence and authority compared to their male counterparts. This affects how they are perceived and treated by colleagues, subordinates, and the public. The political environment and institutional structures may be less accommodating or supportive of women, creating additional hurdles for them to navigate in their roles. Adak (2019) highlights that in Turkey's current legislative term (2018-2023), only six of the thirteen political parties with parliamentary seats have female

members of parliament (MPs). This clearly illustrates the ongoing underrepresentation of women in political leadership, and how change in this area remains uncertain. Historically, politics has been a male-dominated field, making it challenging for women to reach the highest levels. A United Nations study by Jakešević and Lusa (2021) revealed that progress towards gender equality in politics has been uneven, with significant disparities among different states and regions. The political environment and institutional structures may be less accommodating or supportive of women, creating additional hurdles for them to navigate in their roles.

In education, the issue of having more male than female principals is not inherently problematic; rather, it is a symptom of underlying issues. The underrepresentation of women in top school management positions can be attributed not only to the practices of employers but also to the choices made by women themselves. This complex issue is influenced by a myriad of contextual factors, along with various social and political aspects that collectively create unique forms of bias. Gabaldon et al. (2016) categorise the main reasons preventing women from attaining leadership positions into demand and supply factors within the principals' market. On the demand side, bias may arise from organisational policies that enforce double standards in the promotion process. Dula (2018) discovered that males are more likely than their female counterparts of the same race or ethnicity to become principals, and they do so more quickly, indicating the presence of systemic gender biases in the selection process. Conversely, on the supply side, internal barriers may lead women to exclude themselves from pursuing leadership positions.

The underrepresentation of female educators in managerial positions is a consequence of oppression caused by patriarchal domination and the environment it fosters (Mutanga, 2022). In South African secondary schools, some female educators feel so hopeless that they accept submission to the patriarchal system due to the environments they live in (Bruey et al., 2018). These female educators face the challenge of not being recognised because of a culture that elevates men above women. Society holds low expectations for women to be effective leaders if they are appointed to principal positions, resulting in their underrepresentation in management and leadership roles in secondary schools. Moorosi, Bantwini, Molale and Diko (2020) argue that school governance in South Africa remains an area where power imbalances from the post-colonial and post-apartheid eras persist. This means that the leadership structures and decision-making processes within schools continue to reflect the historical inequalities and biases established during colonial and apartheid periods. The persistence of these power imbalances means that, despite policies and initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality, women continue to face significant barriers to achieving leadership positions in school governance (Dyantyi, 2024).

Stereotypes negatively impact women by positioning them in roles where they are unable to lead, primarily due to their gender (Mthembu, 2013; Mythili, 2017). Moorosi (2010) observes that, because of societal and school cultural norms, women in South Africa struggle to climb the social hierarchy. These stereotypes reinforce narrow definitions of leadership that

favour traditional masculine traits such as assertiveness and decisiveness, while undervaluing qualities typically associated with femininity, such as empathy and collaboration. Consequently, women face systemic obstacles in securing leadership roles and encounter bias in hiring, promotion, and decision-making processes. Hightower (2019) argues that cultural practices in South Africa often led men to prefer male leadership and managerial roles. He also notes that stereotyping, a cultural practice stemming from deep-rooted gender biases, favours men over women in leadership positions. These cultural norms and expectations, which prioritise male leadership, perpetuate systemic inequalities by marginalising women from advancement opportunities and decision-making authority. These points underscore how cultural practices reinforce gender norms that not only restrict women's access to leadership roles but also shape societal perceptions of leadership as inherently masculine, thus perpetuating gender disparities in South African organisational settings.

Gender-based stereotypes and cultural discrimination significantly influence the leadership positioning of female educators in secondary schools. Swain (2019) reports that in England, female educators were often seen as not competent enough to lead due to cultural stereotypes that associate leadership with masculinity rather than femininity. These stereotypes prevented women from fully expressing their leadership potential, as they were perceived as subordinate to men. Similarly, Xiang, Ingram and Cangemi (2017) identified gender stereotyping as the primary barrier preventing women in Australia and New Zealand from pursuing high-level decision-making positions in the education sector. Simba (2021) supports the liberal feminist theory, which argues that women are not given equal opportunities and the author advocates that women be provided with equal opportunities as men. In South Africa, cultural practices often favour men over women for leadership and management positions in schools. Hightower (2019) notes that stereotyping is a significant cultural practice contributing to this preference. Negative societal perceptions reinforce the notion that leadership is inherently masculine, based on values traditionally associated with men. Mutanga (2022) highlights that, despite twenty-eight years of democracy in South Africa and the creation of policies to address gender inequality, gender disparities persist in principal positions. This persistence of inequality suggests that the policies in place may not be effectively addressing the deep-rooted socio-cultural norms and institutional biases that hinder women's advancement to leadership roles. Structural barriers, such as biased appointment procedures, lack of support for work-life balance, and insufficient professional development opportunities for women, continue to perpetuate these disparities, indicating a need for more robust and targeted interventions to achieve true gender parity in educational leadership (Dyantyi, 2024). Affirmative action and gender mainstreaming initiatives within the education sector have not fully eradicated sexist cultural attitudes that women face in their communities (Moorosi, 2020). Despite these initiatives, long-standing cultural beliefs and stereotypes about gender roles persist. These attitudes may include the belief that men are more suited to leadership roles or that women's primary responsibilities lie in domestic duties. Such cultural norms can undermine

the effectiveness of affirmative action and gender mainstreaming efforts. Chisholm (2001) reports that some women promoted to managerial positions in Gauteng Province schools became frustrated due to lack of support and eventually left the sector. The absence of support led to feelings of frustration among these women. Managing a school or a department is challenging, and without adequate support, the stress and difficulties of the role can become overwhelming. This trend is also evident in Limpopo Province, as noted by Uwizeyimana and Mathevula (2018), where women remain underrepresented in senior positions despite being the majority in the teaching profession. Principalship is often perceived as a masculine role, even though various policies have been designed to promote gender equality in educational leadership (Bonzet, 2017). In South Africa, government initiatives, such as the South African Schools Act (SASA) No. 84 of 1996, aimed to change gendered perspectives in education management by establishing school governing bodies (SGBs). SASA intended to eliminate gender-based role assignments and the top-down leadership approach from the apartheid era, granting all school interest groups, including women, the right to participate in school leadership and governance. However, SASA falls short as it does not specify measures to prevent the re-establishment of traditional gendered power relations in school management. Diko (2014) observes that SASA perpetuates past practices, especially in rural areas and townships where parents often lack the literacy to engage effectively in school management. Consequently, predominantly male school principals continue to interpret and implement SASA according to their perspectives. In the O. R. Tambo Inland Education District, women striving for principal positions face significant obstacles, with little effort to create opportunities for them. Diko (2014) further notes that societal conventions often view women as inferior to men, despite their qualifications for leadership roles. The reviewed literature suggests that, on a national level, insufficient efforts have been made to address the challenges women face in attaining leadership positions in educational management. Against this backdrop, the study aims to investigate the South African experiences of female principals in secondary school leadership in the O. R. Tambo Education District.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study utilised liberal feminism as its theoretical foundation. Unlike some other feminist theories, liberal feminism does not have a single founder. It emerged during the late 18th and early 19th centuries as part of the first wave of feminism. Notable figures associated with the development of liberal feminist ideas include (Hooks, 2000). These individuals championed women's rights, advocating for equal educational opportunities, legal rights, and suffrage. Liberal feminist ideas have remained influential and have been further developed by subsequent feminist scholars. Liberal feminists advocate for equal opportunities and work to improve conditions for women, particularly in the workplace (Pavlidis, Kennelly & Castro, 2020). This involves addressing and correcting disparities that women face in the workplace, such as unequal pay, limited advancement opportunities, and discriminatory practices. They strive for

policies and practices that promote fairness and equality, ensuring that women can access the same career opportunities, benefits, and working conditions as their male counterparts. Their goal is to remove barriers to education that contribute to inequalities, enabling women to reach their full potential (Pavlidis et al., 2020). They also challenge sex stereotypes and discrimination, striving for equal opportunities for both genders (Bruey et al., 2018). Liberal feminists also work to dismantle gender stereotypes and discrimination. Gender stereotypes are preconceived notions about how people should behave based on their sex, often leading to unfair treatment and limitations on personal and professional opportunities. For instance, stereotypes might suggest that women are less competent in leadership roles or that men are less nurturing. According to liberal feminists, equal access to education and school management positions should be available to all sexes (Pavlidis et al., 2020). This study is grounded in liberal feminist theory due to its focus on women who are denied basic human rights and are not recognised as capable of holding principal positions. The theory is suitable for this research as it empowers female educators to view themselves as competent, effective managers who are qualified to become principals, especially in secondary schools. This theoretical framework is particularly relevant because female educators have historically been denied senior principal roles in secondary schools due to prevailing gender biases.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study research design, utilising interviews to gather data. The qualitative method was chosen to explore participants' knowledge, thoughts, observations, and experiences (Welman & Wilston, 2020). Creswell (2016) defines a case study research design as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clear. This approach involves an in-depth, longitudinal examination of a single instance or event: a case. It provides a systematic way of looking at events, collecting data, analysing information, and reporting the results (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a result, the researcher gained a sharpened understanding of why the instance happened as it did, and what might become important to look at more extensively in future research. Interviews are pivotal in qualitative research as they provide insights into participants' experiences, meanings, and perspectives (Denhardt & Draai, 2015). By using qualitative methods and interviews, the researcher was able to collect detailed information from individuals with specific attributes. This approach allowed the researcher to document experiences, from key informants who had personal experiences, perceptions and observations, about the challenges encountered by females to secondary school leadership.

This study employed the interpretive paradigm to explore female principals' experiences in promotion to secondary school leadership in South Africa, focusing on grasping the subjective meanings and social contexts through which individuals perceive their experiences (Adil et al., 2022). Scholars in this area contend that social interactions shape reality and that meanings are negotiated through these interactions (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). The researcher followed this

approach and aimed to capture the complexity of social phenomena, acknowledge diverse viewpoints, and emphasise the importance of context and individual agency. Similarly, this paper utilised the interpretive approach which operates on the premise that social reality is subjective and shaped by individual experiences and societal contexts (ontology). Through this approach, the researcher gained deeper insights into female principals' experiences in moving to secondary school leadership in South Africa.

Five female secondary schools' principals in the Eastern Cape were purposively sampled. Creswell (2011) defines purposive sampling as a non-random method where participants are selected based on their expertise and experience with the phenomenon under study. In this case, purposive sampling provided the researcher with flexibility to selectively choose participants who aligned with the specific criteria and anticipated outcomes of the study, aiming to yield information-rich results (Maree & Pietersen, 2007; Merriam, 2009). All ethical protocols were observed throughout the study. Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the institution via the higher degrees research committee, with clearance and gatekeepers' letters issued to the researchers. Participants voluntarily agreed to participate and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Their privacy was protected during the study.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, conducted in both IsiXhosa and English to accommodate all respondents. Creswell (2013) describes how semi-structured interviews are designed by outlining the subjects to be covered, controlling the conversation to ensure comprehensive coverage, and asking targeted questions. This approach allowed the researcher to explore the phenomenon under investigation from multiple perspectives. A guide with key topics and questions was used during the interviews. Semi-structured interviews are commonly used to gain a deep understanding of responses and to explore subjects in detail (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

To ensure accuracy and verification, audio recorders were used during data collection. Audio recordings offer several advantages: they keep data "fresh and true", reduce transcription errors, capture nuances like passion and intonation, and minimise loss of context. Participants were interviewed with the aid of a tape recorder to ensure accuracy. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse data from the experiences of female principals in rising to secondary school leadership in five secondary schools in the Eastern Cape. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that is effective for analysing written transcripts from interviews and exploring various topics, ranging from personal experiences to social issues (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). The process involves identifying recurring themes within the data and organising them into distinct categories (Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016). The six steps of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) were utilised, including familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and developing the analysis. Each of these steps was meticulously followed to interpret the data accurately.

This methodology was designed to provide an in-depth understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by female principals in secondary school leadership within the Eastern Cape, using a case study approach to highlight individual narratives and collective themes.

Table 1.

Biographical Information of Participants

Name of the Participant	Gender	Age	Qualifications	Years of Experience
P1	Female	50	Bachelor of Arts	25
P2	Female	47	Bachelor of Education	21
P3	Female	58	Master of Education	32
P4	Female	44	Bachelor of Education Honours	19
P5	Female	51	Advanced Certificate in Education	28

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Unions and Political Affiliations

From the semi-structured interviews, it emerged that female principals encountered significant challenges related to political and union affiliations. Two principals responded:

“I had a hard time getting appointed as a principal because I didn't have strong political or trade union connections. Unlike the people I was competing with, I didn't have the political backing or union support that could have helped improve my chances for the role” **(P1)**.

“I faced difficulties in becoming a principal because I didn't have influential union connections. I was not affiliated in any trade union” **(P3)**.

The findings highlight the significant role that political and trade union connections play in the appointment process for principal positions. Participants revealed that the absence of strong political or union support was a considerable barrier, emphasising how such connections can be pivotal in enhancing one's prospects for leadership roles. These narratives suggest that the appointment process is influenced more by political and union affiliations than by merit or qualifications. This dependency on connections perpetuates a cycle where only those with the right affiliations can access leadership roles, thereby limiting opportunities for capable individuals who are not politically, or union connected. These findings align with Malahlela (2017), who notes that unfair practices by panelists during candidate selection, based on political affiliations, contribute to the underrepresentation of female educators in leadership roles. The lack of transparency in the shortlisting and interview processes is evident. Bayeni and Bhengu (2015) argue that the attitudes of some panelists during these stages leave much to be desired. Despite women forming the majority in the education sector, senior positions like principalships remain predominantly male due to these biased appointment practices. Consequently, this scenario highlights a critical area of concern within the educational leadership landscape, where the fairness and inclusivity of the selection process are called into

question. This reinforces the need for more transparent and equitable appointment processes that value expertise and leadership skills over political or union affiliations.

Gender Stereotypes

Female principals encountered gender stereotypes in their journey to principalship in secondary school, for example two principals responded:

"I encountered significant resistance when I aspired to become a principal, primarily because of entrenched gender stereotypes. Many colleagues and decision-makers held the belief that leadership roles, especially in secondary schools, were better suited for men. Despite having a Master of Education degree in Educational Leadership and Management as my qualification and experience, I was often overlooked in favour of male candidates who were perceived as more authoritative or capable of handling the demands of the position. It was frustrating to see that my leadership abilities were constantly questioned simply because I am a woman" (P3).

"My journey to becoming a principal was nervous with challenges rooted in gender stereotypes. There was a prevailing notion that women, particularly in leadership roles, would be too emotional or soft to effectively manage a school. I had to work twice as hard to prove my competence and dispel these unfounded assumptions. Even after securing the position, I faced disbelief and doubt from some staff and community members who were not accustomed to seeing a female in such a high-ranking role. These stereotypes not only hindered my appointment but also created ongoing challenges in asserting my authority and gaining the respect of my peers" (P4).

These experiences reveal the pervasive influence of gender stereotypes on the appointment and effectiveness of female principals. They highlight the resistance faced by women educators due to the entrenched belief that leadership roles, particularly in secondary schools, are better suited for men. Despite holding qualifications and relevant experience, women are often overlooked in favour of male candidates who are deemed more authoritative. This reflects a systemic bias that questions women's leadership abilities solely based on their gender. These findings illustrate how gender stereotypes not only hinder women's appointments to leadership positions but also create ongoing challenges in asserting their authority and gaining respect. This underscores the need for concerted efforts to challenge and overcome these biases within the educational system. These findings align with those of Xiang, Ingram and Cangemi (2017), who identified gender stereotyping as the primary barrier preventing women in Australia and New Zealand from pursuing high-level decision-making positions in the education sector. These stereotypes often depict women as less competent or suitable for decision-making positions compared to their male counterparts, discouraging many qualified women from aspiring to, or being considered for, such roles. The study highlights how these biases not only affect women's career trajectories but also perpetuate a male-dominated leadership landscape in the education sector. Consequently, the potential for diverse and inclusive leadership is severely limited, necessitating targeted interventions to address and

dismantle these harmful stereotypes. Ehrhart (2023) asserts that even when women attain political decision-making roles, such as being political leaders or cabinet members, gendered barriers persist. Women leaders often face gender stereotypes and biases that question their competence and authority compared to their male counterparts. This affects how they are perceived and treated by colleagues, subordinates, and the public. The political environment and institutional structures may be less accommodating or supportive of women, creating additional hurdles for them to navigate in their roles. Adak (2019) highlights that in Turkey's current legislative term (2018-2023), only six of the thirteen political parties with parliamentary seats have female members of parliament (MPs). This clearly illustrates the ongoing underrepresentation of women in political leadership, and how change in this area remains uncertain. This reveals a global pattern of gendered barriers that question women's competence and authority. The consistent underrepresentation of women in leadership roles across various sectors highlights the urgent necessity for targeted interventions to address and dismantle harmful stereotypes.

Lack of Support and Mentorship

Lack of support and mentorship was one of the significant challenges experienced by female educators in their journey to principalship in secondary schools. This absence of support systems hindered their professional growth and perpetuated the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within secondary schools. Two principals responded that:

"My journey to becoming a principal was significantly hindered by the lack of support and mentorship available to me. In my early career, I often felt isolated and without guidance from experienced leaders. Unlike my male colleagues, who seemed to have mentors and networks to rely on, I had to navigate the challenges of leadership development on my own. This lack of mentorship made it difficult to gain the insights and confidence needed to pursue higher leadership roles. It was a constant struggle to find someone who could provide the necessary support and advice, which ultimately slowed my career progression" **(P1)**.

"As a female educator, I found it challenging to access similar opportunities for mentorship. There were few female role models in leadership positions, and those who were available were often overburdened and unable to provide the consistent support I needed" **(P5)**.

These experiences highlight a significant barrier that the lack of support and mentorship poses for female educators aspiring to principalship positions. Their journey was notably hindered by feelings of isolation and the absence of guidance from experienced leaders. Unlike their male colleagues, who benefited from mentors and supportive networks, they had to navigate the complexities of leadership development independently, which impeded their career progression by depriving them of essential insights and confidence. Even those few mentors who were available were often too overburdened to provide consistent support. These findings are in line with Chisholm (2001), who reported that some women promoted to managerial positions in Gauteng Province schools became frustrated due to lack of support and eventually left the sector. The absence of support led to feelings of frustration among these

women, underscoring the critical need for robust mentorship programmes and support networks to foster the professional growth of female educators and help them overcome these barriers to advance into leadership roles. The absence of support and mentorship for women aspiring to leadership roles greatly impedes their career progression. This is supported by Davis (2012) and Pruitt (2015), who emphasise that the lack of structured support and mentorship programmes leaves women without the essential guidance and encouragement needed to overcome leadership challenges. According to Davis (2012), women have the capability and potential to be effective leaders, yet they often receive less and less effective support, mentorship, sponsorship, and networking opportunities compared to their male counterparts. This disparity in support mechanisms significantly contributes to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. Despite having equal potential and leadership abilities as men, these differences in support, mentorship, sponsorship, and networking create substantial barriers to women's advancement.

Patriarchal Domination

Patriarchal domination was one of the significant challenges experienced by female educators in their journey to principalship in secondary schools. This patriarchal environment often manifested as bias and discrimination, making it difficult for women to gain recognition and respect as capable leaders:

"I often encountered an underlying resistance rooted in traditional beliefs that men are better suited for leadership roles. Many decision-makers and colleagues held the view that leadership should be a male domain, which affected how they evaluated my candidacy. I frequently had to confront and challenge these ingrained biases, which made the process of securing a principalship much more arduous" **(P4)**.

"During the selection process, I faced persistent biases that questioned my ability to lead simply because I am a woman. Even after being appointed, I often had to prove myself repeatedly in ways my male counterparts did not. This ongoing scrutiny and the traditional mindset that men are inherently more capable leaders were significant obstacles in my career advancement" **(P5)**.

These findings highlight the substantial barrier that patriarchal domination poses for female educators aspiring to principalship positions. Both principals encountered deep-seated resistance rooted in traditional beliefs that men are inherently better suited for leadership roles. This resistance was reflected in how decision-makers and colleagues viewed leadership as a male domain, which significantly influenced the evaluation of their candidacies and made the process of securing a principalship more challenging. Even after their appointments, they had to continually prove their capabilities in ways that their male counterparts did not. This aligns with Moorosi's (2010) observation that societal and school cultural norms in South Africa impede women's advancement up the social hierarchy. These stereotypes reinforce narrow definitions of leadership that favour traditionally masculine traits such as assertiveness and decisiveness while undervaluing qualities typically associated with femininity, such as empathy

and collaboration. As a result, women faced systemic obstacles in securing leadership roles and encounter bias in hiring, promotion, and decision-making processes. Hightower (2019) also notes that cultural practices in South Africa often led men to prefer male leadership and managerial roles, with stereotyping favouring men over women in leadership positions due to deep-rooted gender biases. These substantial barriers imposed by patriarchal domination significantly impact female educators' aspirations to principalship positions, revealing deep-seated biases that favour men for leadership roles.

This is against the liberal feminist theory in which this study is grounded, which advocates for equal opportunities and work to improve conditions for women, particularly in the workplace (Pavlidis, Kennelly & Castro, 2020). Liberal feminism theory strives for policies and practices that promote fairness and equality, ensuring that women can access the same career opportunities, benefits, and working conditions as their male counterparts. Their goal is to remove barriers to education that contribute to inequalities, enabling women to reach their full potential (Pavlidis et al., 2020). They also challenge sex stereotypes and discrimination, striving for equal opportunities for both genders (Bruey et al., 2018). Liberal feminists also work to dismantle gender stereotypes and discrimination. Gender stereotypes are preconceived notions about how people should behave based on their sex, often leading to unfair treatment and limitations on personal and professional opportunities. For instance, stereotypes might suggest that women are less competent in leadership roles or that men are less nurturing. According to liberal feminists, equal access to education and school management positions should be available to all sexes (Pavlidis et al., 2020). This perspective emphasises that both men and women should be able to enter and advance in these fields on an equal footing. Liberal feminists advocate for policies and practices that eliminate gender-based disparities, ensuring that opportunities for education and professional growth in school management are accessible to everyone, regardless of their gender. The goal is to create a fair and equitable environment where qualifications and capabilities, rather than gender, determine access to and success in these roles.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Policy and Practice

To address the barriers identified, it is crucial to implement several strategic interventions aimed at promoting equity in the appointment of female principals. Firstly, appointment processes should be restructured to minimise the influence of political and union affiliations. This can be achieved by establishing transparent and merit-based criteria for selection, ensuring that candidates are evaluated based on their qualifications and leadership skills rather than their connections. Secondly, efforts should be made to challenge and dismantle gender stereotypes through targeted training and awareness programs for decision-makers and stakeholders. By fostering a more inclusive understanding of leadership qualities, these programmes can help shift entrenched biases and support a more equitable selection process. Additionally, creating robust mentorship and support networks specifically for female educators can significantly enhance their career progression. Establishing formal mentorship programmes and ensuring

that experienced leaders are accessible to aspiring principals will provide the necessary guidance and support, helping to bridge the gap in career advancement opportunities.

The findings from this study underline the multifaceted challenges that female educators face in securing principalship positions, rooted in political and union affiliations, gender stereotypes, and a lack of support and mentorship. Addressing these barriers requires a comprehensive approach that includes reforming appointment processes, combating gender biases, and establishing supportive structures for women in education. Aligning these efforts with the principles of liberal feminism, which advocate for equal opportunities and fair treatment regardless of gender, can drive meaningful change. By promoting transparency, equity, and support, educational institutions can create an environment where all individuals, regardless of gender, could advance and excel in leadership roles. This not only enhances the inclusivity and fairness of the educational system but also ensures that leadership positions are filled by the most capable and qualified individuals, ultimately benefiting the broader educational community.

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