

FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO PREJUDICE AGAINST FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN ZIMBABWE'S TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

Worldwide, women who have succeeded in leadership are often disfavoured, suffer discrimination and are challenged by their male counterparts. In addition, a challenging environment for women aspiring to leadership positions in under-developed countries is exacerbated by deep-rooted patriarchal norms which often manifest as a culture of hegemonic masculinity. This research focused on factors that contribute to prejudice against women in leadership positions in Zimbabwe tertiary institutions. A qualitative research approach guided by an interpretivist paradigm was used. The sample consisted of one female principal, one vice principal, fifteen female heads of departments and eight female members of the student council (n=25). The participants were selected from three colleges in Zimbabwe. Data was gathered through individual interviews, focus group interviews and document analysis. The findings revealed that the manifestation of prejudice against female leaders was a result of a number of factors including domination of hierarchical structures by males, negative influence of a patriarchal culture, gender roles and socialization of women, deprivations and Christianity. Intervention strategies are proposed to pave the way for greater acceptance of female leadership in institutions of higher learning.

Keywords: *Prejudice, female leadership, multiple deprivations, prejudice against females, female leaders in education.*

1. Introduction and background

Zimbabwe's entrenched patriarchal system, characterised by hegemonic masculinity, presents significant obstacles for women pursuing leadership roles (Shepherd & Mupa, 2022). Research indicates that male dominance and limited gender awareness actively prevent the recognition of women's leadership potential (Chitsamatanga et al., 2018). Female leaders encounter multiple forms of discrimination, including stereotypes, mockery, and negative labelling, all of which diminish their leadership credibility and impede their professional progress. While some studies explore prejudice against female leadership in higher education (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017), they often focus on developed countries or specific institutions (e.g., China). Although existing studies on Zimbabwean education leadership (Hlatywayo et al., 2014) and affirmative action initiatives (Chitsamatanga et al., 2020) provide important perspectives, they fail to fully examine the specific factors that contribute to prejudice against female leaders within Zimbabwe's tertiary education.

Zimbabwe's patriarchal system, deeply rooted in both pre-colonial and colonial influences, continue to entrench male dominance across societal structures (Shepherd & Mupa, 2022). This system assigns distinct gender roles where men are socialised as decision-makers and leaders, while women are predominantly confined to domestic and caregiving responsibilities. Such norms manifest in discriminatory practices and perpetuate women's marginalisation. The existing societal biases against female leadership may limit their access to opportunities. Research points to the lack of women in leadership roles in education. The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions across Zimbabwe, including in universities and colleges, is a cause for concern.

Despite women constituting the majority in the teaching profession, their representation in leadership remains low. A study by Chabaya et al. (2009) found out that men occupy 96.3% of secondary head posts, with women holding only 3.7%. According to the Zimbabwe Ministry of primary and secondary education report, there was 29,2 percent female primary school representation for principals, while in secondary schools the female representation for female principals is 16,4 percent (Zimbabwe Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education report, 2022). In Zimbabwe, in 2022 there were only two out of 21 Universities headed by female vice-chancellors (Anderson et al., 2023). This underrepresentation

exacerbates the lack of role models and mentorship for aspiring female leaders. Despite growing recognition of women's qualifications for leadership roles, prejudice against female leadership persists. While research confirms the underrepresentation of women leadership position, the study therefore sought to examine the factors that contribute to prejudice against female leadership in tertiary education in Zimbabwe.

2. Methodology

A qualitative research approach guided by an interpretivist paradigm was used. The sample consisted of one female principal, one vice principal, fifteen female heads of departments and eight female members of the student council (n=25). The participants were selected from three colleges in Zimbabwe. Data was gathered through individual interviews, focus group interviews and document analysis. Data was analysed using content analysis method. The role congruity theory was used to understand the data.

3. Results and discussion

The results showed that the hierarchical structure within institutions, patriarchal culture, gender roles, deprivations and Christian religion are factors that contributed to prejudice against female leadership in tertiary education.

3.1. Manifestation of prejudice within the hierarchical structure

Tertiary institutions, as with many other organisations have hierarchical structures with different levels of leadership positions. The results revealed definite hierarchical structures in tertiary education colleges under study. The structures showed levels, that is, from a lower to higher level. The progression is hierarchical, showing a clear path between the structures. It was also noted during the focus group interviews that the SRC positions were also hierarchical with the position of the president being the top position. The results also revealed the dominance of males in top leadership positions in the participating tertiary institutions. *Yeah, of course we may talk and say that it is balanced, but in my view it is not. Because for years I've been here since 2009. It's now more than ten years. There's never been a female SRC President. And I do not remember having even vice who is female.* (C3HoD2) Out of the three sampled colleges there was only one female principal. Even though the progression was clear, less than half of the women were principals. Furthermore, in all the sampled colleges the position of SRC president was occupied by a male student. This male dominance in leadership limits the visibility of female role models, potentially discouraging young women from pursuing leadership goals and hindering personal growth and career progression for women in these institutions. The findings by Ademe and Singh (2015) also affirm that a lack of role models is a barrier stifling women from assuming leadership positions.

The data showed a lack of transparency in decision making regarding appointments and demotions. *I don't think I had been regarded as good in my work. But I never got a written warning or even a verbal warning and I am not doing well. It was like do this, maintain this and then I was only told at the end that you are demoted* (C3 HOD3). Women were sometimes the unfortunate targets as they were demoted, and their position given to a male counterpart without being given any opportunity for defence. This lack of involvement in decision making, particularly in matters affecting them suggests that their ideas and perspectives were not valued, leading to frustration among female staff. The exclusion from decision-making processes can affect women at all levels of the organisational hierarchy (Oliveira et al, 2012).

3.2. Patriarchal culture and manifestation of prejudice against female leaders

The results revealed cultural tendencies which show masculinity. This patriarchal culture which focuses on men being the head is also dominant at the workplace where men believe that they should be the leaders. *...because of our cultural background of this patriarchal society, lecturers or authorities seemed to take time to realise that there is equal footing upon the male and female in leadership. So, I think that is where our prejudices start because of patriarchal background.* (C1 HoD3) *Men dominate and men head... patriarchy still exists.* (C1 FG). Patriarchal culture has a negative influence on women's participation in leadership positions. It emanated from the patriarchal ideologies which tended to favour men as the male child was valued more in societies. Additionally, this marginalisation and silencing of women in such cultures perpetuated prejudice, leading to direct and indirect discrimination.

The manifestation of prejudice was also a result of patriarchal socialisation. The participants revealed that the basis of prejudice was on how women were socialised. *... prejudice is mainly founded on patriarchy. It is beliefs that women are supposed to be subordinate to men and in most cases, they are looked down upon. They are not seen as people who can be creative, and strong but are regarded as people*

who are emotional and not supposed to be really speaking in front of men. At this institution there is a history of men who have been in leadership positions and very few ladies have been in such positions, so I consider patriarchal socialisation as a major factor. (C1 HOD 5). Women were culturally socialised to believe that they were not competent to lead. Patriarchal society confined women to positions of mothers and wives at home, taking care of the family and subordinate to men. Through socialisation, a girl is groomed to become a wife, mother, and a provider of food from an early age (Choge, 2015). Female leaders at these colleges were evaluated as weak and emotional people who cannot stand up against men.

The results also displayed the patriarchal hegemony which disrespected women and feminised some leadership posts. *... female students will come as secretary, which is also a stereotype in a trait, I am concerned that you find that women are scribed to these post Secretary and at times treasurer. That's where you find them sitting.* (C3 HOD2) *... sizabona izintu zobomama lapha (we will see women's way of doing).* (C2 HoD2). Leadership roles such as that of SRC secretary and treasurer were feminised, reinforcing stereotypes that women's traits only suit certain positions, while higher roles like president remained male-dominated. This reflects a societal belief in male superiority in leadership, as seen in the gender-imbalanced SRC compositions where men predominantly held to positions, reinforcing traditional notions of male leadership (Heilman, 2012). More so, the feminist comments were meant to demean, show distrust against female leaders to undermine them. These comments showed disapproval, disrespect, and doubt of women's leadership capability.

The finding on patriarchal socialisation and cultural norms resonates with that of Melka et al. (2022) that cultural factors limited women's aspirations, making it difficult to access leadership positions. From childhood, women are conditioned to accept subordinate positions, with leadership seen as inherently male, leading to their authority being undermined in professional settings. Male subordinates often resist female leadership, reflecting the societal belief that men should hold power, as evidenced by the feminisation of lower-ranking roles like secretaries and treasurers while top positions remain male-dominated. Disrespectful comments and insubordination further marginalise women. Similar findings by Dlamini and Adams (2014) revealed that in institutions of higher education women experience male supremacy, disempowerment, and disrespect.

3.3. Gender roles and manifestation of prejudice

The research results clearly showed the women's position as subordinates hence they were given minority roles. *It will show you that women have always been given a minority role in whatever they do. Even in the home, they are a minority. The woman cannot be above the man, for instance the role of women is in the kitchen, and their place is in the home. Therefore, they cannot be seen in the workplace, taking up roles to lead both men and women.* (C3 HOD2). The gender roles reflect that women were in minority and subordinate to men. The kitchen remained their operational place. The gender roles such as cooking, being mothers and wives and taking care of children were ascribed to women. The Role Congruity Theory ascribes them to communal roles caring for the welfare of others (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Gender role socialisation starts at home at an early age. They are embedded from childhood to adulthood and are accepted by society. The girl child is socialised into roles centred around childcare and domestic duties effectively limiting their aspirations and vision of what they can achieve beyond becoming wives, mothers and caregivers. In other words, the girl child is groomed to become a wife, mother and a provider of food from an early age, creating a limited vision of their potential (Choge, 2015). This conditioning can lead girls to internalise the belief that women should occupy subordinate positions compared to men.

Adherence to gender roles resulted in the development of low self-esteem, rejection and role conflict which impacted negatively on women's professional advancement. *Lack of confidence is caused by low self-esteem which is a result of being consistently told that you cannot do this ... mostly coming from men ... If your close acquaintance tells you that you cannot do this, you develop low self-esteem.* (C3HoD1) *... I was offered a promotion to be a vice principal at another college, but I rejected the offer because it meant leaving my family and I am about to retire... I would rather remain here as head of department.* (C1HoD2). Continuous reminder of where female leaders belonged in the patriarchal system resulted in the development of low self-esteem. Adherence to gender roles also contributed to women being rejected by other women in their career progression through promotion. Internalised bias and societal conditioning where women unconsciously believe that men are better suited for leadership roles, disadvantage women from seeking promotion. Women found that the conflict between work and home expectations was such that they rejected promotion. People's perceptions of individuals are shaped by their alignment with societal expectations of their social roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Moreover, patriarchal socialisation thus entrenches male dominance in leadership while marginalising women, sustaining systemic gender inequality in both familial and institutional spheres. However, findings by Choge (2015) revealed that cultural practices and stereotyping may have influenced male perceptions to women in the past, but that good leadership is not specific to gender but one's leadership qualities.

3.4. Deprivations associated with prejudice against female leadership

The research results revealed that women suffer multiple deprivations including lack of induction, female underrepresentation, early childhood gender deprivations, lack of material resources and human support. On lack of induction the participants related their experiences as follows: *When we came in, we were not inducted ... we had been promised to be inducted... so I had to use my experience gained from working with my former principals to chat my way through. I also had to consult other colleagues... I worked in the vice principal's office sometimes we would be acting in the principal's office but because of no induction I had to play it by ear and do a lot of consultation.* (C1 P1). *We went for a meeting with the vice principal and the principal. We were just given a written constitution of what was required from us to do.* (C1 FG). Thus, female leaders were systematically denied proper induction despite its importance for role clarity and effectiveness. Left without guidance, they struggled in their positions, often relying on self-learning or facing resistance when consulting male predecessors, particularly when those men were professional competitors. Student leaders were also not inducted. This deprivation of induction and mentorship opportunities known to boost leadership skills and confidence left women disadvantaged and reinforced workplace gender inequalities.

Leadership involves accomplishing organisational goals and material resources are a necessity to achieve these goals. Female leaders were challenged by lack of material resources. *You are running an institution, you have to collect fees, and sometimes resources are not enough to do some of the things that you feel you want to do as a leader, you take your project, it will take you two years to even start on it because we are trying to build the resources, sometimes manpower that is supposed to drive the institution for some time it is not there, so sometimes when you fail, it is not really your fault because certain things were lacking... (C1 P). ...rightfully there are resources which are supposed to be yours that is being allocated a vehicle or residence at the college,Yes, I was denied for some time, and I believe it was because I am a woman... if I was a man no one would have questioned... It is also coming from home, even those leaders who are depriving us a lot of things because of their upbringing.* (C2VP1). Female leaders faced significant challenges due to resource shortages exacerbated by the country's economic crisis. Projects were delayed, and women struggled to fulfil their potential, while male leaders disproportionately benefited from available resources. Their shortcomings are often attributed to lack of resources, reinforcing stereotypes that linked material deprivation to lower capability (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Additionally, resource allocation was often gender-biased, with patriarchal norms denying women access to essential tools, undermining their leadership and perpetuating workplace prejudice.

Female leaders at times experienced a lack of moral support in their decision making. There was a 'cutting down' of successful women, but at times support was given out of sympathy. *Sometimes if a woman passes a decision, they don't simply take it like a suggestion that is positive, they tend to crush that. If a woman doesn't defend that at the end of the day your view or suggestion is thrown out and their voices are always louder than female voices.* (C2HoD3). The decisions of females were undermined, criticised, and opposed by male subordinates. They felt that there was a bias towards views from men and a female decision was not considered relevant. Additionally, men did not fully support female leadership as they doubted their decision-making capability. Perhaps the reason was based on perception that females lack decisiveness and assertiveness. According to theory, individuals are more likely to accept and support leaders who exhibit characteristics and behaviours traditionally associated with leadership roles, such as decisiveness, assertiveness and confidence (Eagly & Karau 2002).

Early childhood deprivation of opportunities to participate in decision making was a source of prejudice and a cause of women's marginalisation in leadership positions. Women were not given the opportunity to make family decisions in the home. Gender roles from childhood disadvantage women in leadership, as girls are socialised to prioritise domestic duties while boys are groomed for leadership. This early deprivation of leadership opportunities carries into adulthood, making it difficult for women in tertiary education to confidently assume leadership roles.

3.5. Christianity and prejudice against female leadership

One of the factors that also emerged which contributed to the manifestation of prejudice was religion. This is what the participants said: *Women generally have not been taken as leaders but have been taken as people who should bow down to men, probably this started biblical[ly] when man have always told themselves to be the head, and this has been taken to organisations* (C2HoD4). Data gathered from the participants revealed the aspect of religion as a contributor to the undermining of females. The indication in the Bible that women are helpers to men was perceived as giving them a leading position. The results showed discrimination and undermining of women in some church organisations where women are not allowed to preach. Men may use this biblical aspect at the workplace to make female colleagues their subordinates.

The study highlights how religious interpretations reinforce gender-based prejudice, with biblical teachings often cited to justify male dominance and female subordination in leadership roles. Despite women forming the majority in religious communities, doctrines emphasising ‘man as the head’ systematically exclude them from preaching, decision-making, and leadership positions. This religiously sanctioned patriarchy intersects with cultural norms to perpetuate inequality, as evidenced in tertiary institutions where such beliefs persist. The findings by Essien and Ukpong (2012) revealed that religion and cultural prejudice against women are drivers of patriarchy and inequality.

4. Conclusion

The manifestation of prejudice against female leadership is a result of a number of factors which include hierarchical structures, patriarchal culture, gender roles, deprivations and religion. The factors limit the progression of women to leadership position, hence there is underrepresentation of women leadership in tertiary education in Zimbabwe. The study propels key recommendations which include implementing institutional gender policies to ensure transparent recruitment and 50/50 representation, alongside leadership development programs like mentorship (both formal and informal) and role modelling to empower women. Accordingly, Oyeniran and Lili (2020) also recommended a transformation of structures together with policies which increase recruitment on female leadership. To counter patriarchal norms, awareness campaigns, using media, posters, and SDG focused discussions are proposed to promote gender equality. In addition, institutions should foster inclusive decision-making by involving women in committees and creating women friendly workplace cultures that support work-life balance. Collectively, these measures aim to dismantle systemic barriers, challenge stereotypes, and create equitable leadership opportunities for women in tertiary education.

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