AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

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ABSTRACT

Literature acknowledges the importance of women's participation in politics in general, and particularly in school governance. However, there is evidence of women's participation being discouraged and pushed out within both the political and societal milieu. As a result, governments have legislated women's participation, using instruments to promote democracy and quality education for all. This article explores the approaches which African, South African women use, in negotiating democracy as citizens, to participate in school governance. Data were collected employing a qualitative approach, using in-depth interviews and participant observation. The participants were 10 black South Africans ranging in age between 40 and 65 years. The findings of a study on which this article is based, guided by Arnstein's Ladder of Participation (1969), reflect women's negotiation of their school governance participation in three selected South African communities. The findings are indicative of complex approaches to policy implementation in post-1994 South Africa. Since participation is mostly explored using European theories and perspectives, this study recommends the deliberate application of African theories to better understand women's participation in African contexts. The implication of this study is that women who were young and unmarried had adopted strategies which enabled them to participate in school governance.

Keywords: African perspective, Culture, Gender; Participation, School governance.,

INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, one of the attributes of school leadership is school governance. Although the way school governance is described differs significantly, perhaps in the South African context, school governance relates to, inter alia, part of the processes and mechanisms by which the school operates, and the use of authority/collaboration frameworks to assign resources and coordinate/control activities linked to school management (Department of Education [DoE] 2007). Parents, educators, and learners are drawn into a collaboration aimed at educating learners in this management level. For decades, school management has been a staple of school systems here and in other parts of the world (Lemmer & Badenhorst 1997; Kutelo & Olowe 2013; Hujala, Vlason & Szesci 2017). For decades, the role of stakeholders and the broader community in school life (including its decision-making processes) has been a key theme for social scientists (Sadovnik, Cookson & Semel 2001). As such, any school's success depends on the quality, skills, and characteristics of its governance (James, Goodall, Howarth & Knights 2014). School

governance committees are a significant force influencing the nature of the outcomes of educational activities and processes (Daun & Mundy 2011). School governance is however a relatively recent practice within the South African educational context As Naidoo (2005) points out, space was provided for school governance by the enactment of the South Africa Schools Act (SASA), number 85 of 1996 (RSA 1996).

While South Africa's history of school governance has been relatively brief, the motivation for its implementation in schools and the historical context that gave rise to its supporting legislative structure is well known (Ministerial Review Study 2004; Naidoo 2005; Duku 2006; Mncube 2009; Mavuso & Duku 2014). Against the context of a transition from authoritarian rule, ethnic division, and an unequal socio-economic environment to a democratic dispensation, South African parents, students and educators were able to engage in the governance of their educational institutions (Sayed 2002; Naidoo 2005). While the advent of democracy has not erased many parents and school communities' uneven socioeconomic backgrounds (Woolard 2002), it has encouraged these groups to become involved in the management of the affairs of their schools. For many SASA, as the key piece of legislation to give school governance legitimacy, it is a tool aimed, among other things, at remedying past exclusions and promoting much-needed change, in favour of the values of inclusion and involvement in different locations.

The benefits, drawbacks, and ideological underpinnings of school governance have been extensively analyzed in the current study landscape in South Africa. After an appraisal of the state of school governance in local schools, the Ministerial Review Committee (2004) highlighted its unifying effects. Despite this, scholars such as Karlsen (1999), Naidoo (2005), Sayed and Soudien (2005), and Duku (2006) reject this view, arguing that conflicts among members currently dominate school governance. Some scholars argue that power and value relationships still form the engagement and involvement of people in school governance, given the historical legacies of isolation, ethnic inequalities, description, and contextual variations (Naidoo 2005). When SASA was implemented, it was on the assumption that a new school governance landscape will be developed (Naidoo, 2005). Many critics have, however, blamed SASA for the tension which is evident in school governance structures. The Act, for example, is seen as predominantly middle class in identity and therefore equally normalizes parental involvement in school governance; another critique is that it implies that parents have the money and time to spend on school-related activities (Fakir 2003; Dyer & Rose 2005; Sayed & Soudien 2005; Brown & Duku 2008).

When the above criticisms of SASA are viewed in the context of the socio-economic realities facing many rural communities, it is difficult to disagree with the above points. The Ministerial Review Study (2004) blames socioeconomic difficulties for paralysing some parents' participation in school governance activities, especially in rural communities. A message of insignificance is always conveyed to the former as disadvantaged and affluent parent groups come together. Social tension, loneliness, rejection, superiority, and psychological stress, as found in the sense of Botswana, Thailand, and South Africa are an effect that is evident at such gatherings (Brown 2005; Thacheen 2005; Duku 2006). In Nigeria, Francisca, and Anike (2016) found that teachers influenced school governance and tended to isolate parents. This often led to

the isolation of certain social categories in communities – the antithesis against engagement. It is easy to push away parents especially those who do not meet the middle-class standards implied in SASA, in situations such as these. If they are marginalised and denied democratic participation, it is contrary to the values of SASA. Amongst those who appear to be pushed out of democratic spaces are women, despite the reported benefits of their participation.

This article suggests that African women's participation may be misunderstood when this phenomenon is evaluated using lenses which are not rooted in an African perspective on participation. The aim here is to unearth how African women negotiate their participation. Such an undertaking will contribute to national and international debates on discourses around women's participation, from the perspective of African cultures and traditions. The following research questions apply to this study: What approaches do women use in school governance participation, and why? What lessons do this research bring about African culture and women's voices?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Exploring the Gender Construct

Godwin (2013) dispels the notion that 'woman' and/or 'gender' can be used to mean the same thing. Although the terms are, in some instances, used interchangeably, carelessly, and even loosely, sex is biologically determined and gender is more complex; a state of becoming (Godwin 2013; Mead 2017). Gender is constructed by the social world, which may include religion, education, family structure, and other social or cultural factors. In some instances, gender can even be created through legalised or informal social structures (Ntuli 2004).

Worldwide, women aspire to participate in leadership and politics, and there is a strong argument to be made for their participation: Kassa (2015) refers to justice and experience as justification for this. The claim of justice is that women account for about half the population and thus have the right to be represented while considering the experience of women means that their experiences vary from those of men and therefore need to be reflected fairly in debates that lead to policy-making and implementation. Women's participation can be linked with benefits that include their basic needs and problems in communities being addressed, and openness, accountability, and political responsiveness being ensured (Kassa 2015). Nqiwa (2015) suggests that, as leaders, women can directly improve the conditions and lives of others.

Globally, participation is gendered, with the dominant gender (men) enjoying more power than the submissive gender (women) (Kassa 2015; Pippa & Inglahard 2016; Kiamba 2018). Most women's participation is regulated by social structures and tradition. In Nigeria, their low levels of participation in politics are reportedly due to their limited political consciousness. Further, strictness, rigidity, and cultural complexities have relegated women to the background, politically speaking (Godwin 2013). Similarly, in Kenya and Ghana, even though provisions legislate women's participation, this does not translate into transformative equality (Owiso & Sefa 2017). The evidence is no different in South Africa and Indonesia, where the literature identifies socio-cultural obstacles, culture, old age, and marital status, as well as a

lack of balance between work and family, as discouraging women from participating (Brown & Duku 2008; Mavuso & Duku 2014; Nqiwa 2015; Feruglio, Lestari, Bell & Brock 2017).

Kiamba (2008) identifies having to choose between, and/or balance, work, and family, along with women's own fear of success, as significant obstacles. Elmuti, Jia, and Davis (2009) posit that, due to lifestyle conflicts, women as primary caregivers choose their families rather than political positions or career promotion. In this regard, their lives are less flexible than those of men, and they have less leisure time to participate in public events (particularly if they are the heads of families) (McEwan 2003). It is often not easy for most women to participate in leadership and politics (Choudhary 2018).

Kiamba (2008) found that gender stereotyping was one of the most important barriers preventing women from assuming leadership positions. In this regard they face a 'double-edged sword': there are gender role stereotypes, as well as long-standing and widespread beliefs that male traits are consistent with leadership, thus leadership is mainly articulated in terms of male discourse and stereotypes. In African societies, the belief is that men lead, and women need men to lead and protect them (Duku 2006).

Societal Norms

Pippa and Norris (2016) suggest that women limitation in social and political participation is a worldwide phenomenon, which is due to multiple factors, including societal attitudes and social structural barriers towards their leadership, gender and cultural patterns, the ideology of women's place (in the home, in society), their predetermined social roles, and male dominance and control (Godwin 2013; Kassa 2015). As such, the societal and cultural norms imposed on women bar them from entering politics and restrict their levels of participation. Even in developed countries such as America, women's underrepresentation in politics raises fundamental concerns about equality (Choudhary 2018). This encourages women to play submissive roles that see their place as being in the kitchen, and it locates men as the decision-makers, relegating women to become spectators and followers in the political space. The implementation of positive anti-discrimination strategies (e.g., affirmative action) is likely to promote gender parity in terms of participation, especially in developing nations (Pippa & Inglahard 2016). In developing countries such as South Africa, instruments such as the South African Women's Charter for Effective Equality (1994) were designed to encourage "full and equal participation in the creation of a non-sexist, non-racist democratic society". Such instruments have not inherently bridged the gender divide or led to real representative participation (Godwin 2013; Pippa & Inglahard 2016).

Unlike the research studies referred to above, this article aims to apply an African perspective, in order to provide a different angle to the dominant narrative that African cultures "silence" women. The authors will demonstrate how African women's engagement and involvement can be understood from the perspective of representative participation.

Social Identity Theory

The formation of a social identity requires a process of defining oneself relative to characteristics which are shared with others. In the view of Hall (1999:21),' social identity must go through the "eye" of the other's needle before it can build itself'. Identity, then is a bimodal phenomenon that connects internal self-perceptions to self-perception as part of a social environment, the creation of which requires a distinction between ourselves and others, or between ourselves and them. The bimodal view of identity implies that a conflict between distinction and association is defined by the creation of identity; that is, the need to find boundaries between self and others.

This article informs the idea that social identities are never independent, united, or unchanged, but are fragmented, broken, and multiple and constructed by discursive, antagonistic discourses (Hall 1996). Depending on his/her self-interest or life history, a person may assert several identities (work, religion, ethnicity, etc.). Bargaining is implicit in the transition phase of social identity, based on Rossiter's (1999) study. As a method of socialization, bargaining suggests a viewpoint of exchange-something can be gained and something must be sacrificed in order to obtain that gain-which means equity and anticipation (Brown & Schulze 2002). Many facets of social life can be clarified in terms of tacit and explicit negotiation and negotiating, including identity problems (Scholl 1981). One of the main factors of negotiation is self-interest (Hoyle 1986). For perceived benefit, individuals may participate in bargaining process. The desire for power and control, or more personal ambitions and secret motives, can be the source of self-interest itself (Blasé & Anderson 1995). How women engage in school governance can provide clues about or lack of) their self-interest and community interests. Their presence can also provide hints about how the process of identity negotiation is approached, as its effectiveness is decided by how it starts (Rossiter 1999), with the foundation being each woman's particular culture.

As much as culture can be disputed (Ntsebeza 2006), it gives them a sense of protection by identifying with a specific culture makes individuals feel they belong. Amongst the constructs that lead to a sense of security is a sense of membership of one (or more) groups. Hall's (1996) cultural identity model recognizes that there are still important points of profound and substantial distinction apart from the many points of similarity, which constitute 'what we are or what we have become "Identity, therefore, is not static … but rather something that each age and society re-creates. It is a historical, social, intellectual and political process that takes place as a contest involving individuals and institutions" (Said 1995:332). If identities and culture cannot be thought of as rigid, Nyamnjoh (2005) refers to culture as a product of interactions stemming from diverse cultural points of departure. This means that "there is always something old in the new, even if the new cannot be reduced to the old" (Nyamnjoh 2001:3). This implies that even if 'new' culture is introduced, an individual's old familial habits – especially those that are valued and rewarded – are more likely to guide his/her interaction with the 'new'. Hall and Nyamnjoh's respective approaches may assist in explaining why African women participate in school governance the way they do (or why they fail to participate).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ARNSTEIN'S LADDER OF PARTICIPATION

The definition of participation, as noted by Arnstein (1969), is like eating spinach: in theory, nobody is against it because it is good for you, but it is not for the taste of all. Cleaver (1999) defines participation as an act of faith, something which people believe and rarely challenge, based on three key views: that participation is intrinsically a positive thing, particularly for the participants; that focusing on getting the strategies right is the principal way of ensuring the effectiveness of such approaches; and that considerations of power and politics should, on the whole. In addition, the participation literature is also quite ambiguous about the incentives that convince people to participate (Cleaver 1999) Participation is typically based on a process of mobilisation and is closely related to the social responsibility resumption act.

The Ladder of Participation of Arnstein (1969) serves as a basis for classifying different particular participation-related approaches. Arnstein (1969) found that most public engagement strategies are used in ways that do not authentically include people, while in community planning and decision-making, this approach involves citizens. It is possible to distinguish three levels: nonparticipation, tokenism, and citizen power/genuine involvement. From low-intensity interaction at the bottom rung to higher intensities higher up the ladder, the ladder distinguishes between the various features and levels of involvement. Here, the emphasis is on the partnership, delegated power, and citizen control, but for the sake of completeness, all the stages will be briefly outlined.

Figure 1: Arnstein's Ladder of Participation
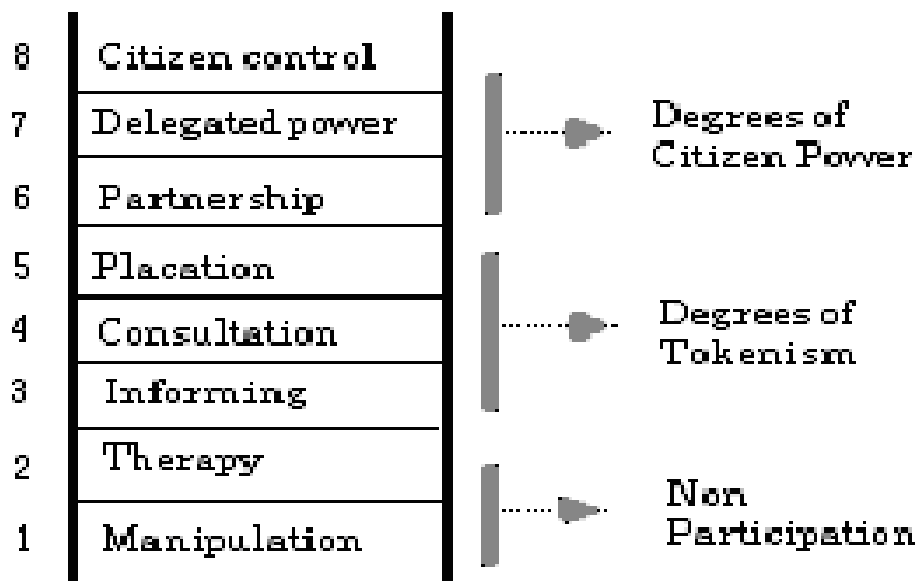
Source: Amstein 1969

Figure 1 shows, the bottom rungs of the ladder are (1) manipulation and (2) therapy, which can be defined as non-participation are the lower rungs of the ladder, although some substitute them for actual participation. Their main aim is not to encourage people to engage in the preparation or execution of initiatives, but to allow the participants to be 'read' or 'cured' by powerholders. Rungs 3 and 4 signify levels associated with 'tokenism' that when told or consulted, enable the have-nots to hear and speak. If power-holders allow such engagement as the complete extent of the involvement of people, the latter can actually hear and be heard. But in these circumstances, they lack the power to guarantee that the strong would hear their views. There is no follow-through, no 'muscle' when involvement is limited to these stages, thus no assurance of altering the status quo. This is identified by Arnstein as mere window dressing.

Rung (5), placation, is simply a higher degree of tokenism since the basic rules allow guidance from the have-nots, while the powerholders maintain the right to decide. This is the level at which hand-picked 'worthy' committees are co-opted. Citizens are permitted to advise or intend ad infinitum, but the ultimate right to determine the validity or efficacy of that advice is maintained by powerholders.

There are degrees of civic influence further up the ladder, which involve rising clout in decision-making. Citizens may enter into a (6) relationship that allows them to negotiate with conventional powerholders and participate in trade-offs. Power is redistributed by agreement between these two parties that consent to share strategy and decision-making obligations by such processes as joint policy boards, planning committees, and mechanisms for resolving impasses. Once some sort of give and take has defined the ground rules, they are not subject to unilateral change. When there is an organized power base in the group to which the city officials are accountable, this level of engagement works most efficiently. Arnstein (1969) uses this stage as a metaphor for increasing access to decision-making power, to arrive at genuine bargaining power.

In Arnstein's ladder, the topmost rungs, (7) delegated power, and (8) citizen control, see the have-nots obtaining the lion's share of the decision-making power or even full managerial power. For example, at the delegated power level, negotiations between citizens and public officials can result in the former obtaining dominant decision-making authority over a particular programme. Citizen control, at the highest level, is characterised by a degree of power and control which guarantees that participants can govern said programme and be in full charge of policy and management-related aspects. Partners do not, however, have to be equal in terms of skills or even confidence: what is important, is that they come together, trust each other, and show commitment.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

A qualitative research methodology was adopted by the study, which was located within the phenomenological design, since it enabled the entry into the life-world of the participants, enabling the researchers to examine their experiences of living. Crucially, this approach argues

that knowledge is subjective and ideographic, and the fact is context-dependent-data that can only be gained after entering the respective realities of the participants.

Sampling The Research Sites and Participants

Three Eastern Cape communities participated in this research. The selected South African sites were classified as deep-rural, being located in remote areas which, geographically and socially speaking, resort under traditional leadership. Parents with children in the local primary schools and school governing board (SGB) members were selected for participation. The sampling process, which took place at the three schools, led to a total of ten parents participating: seven females and three males. The participants were black South Africans ranging in age between 40 and 65 years.

Data Collection Instrument and Procedures

Data were collected through participant observation: two community meetings were held, and one SGB meeting. After these meetings, phenomenological interviews were conducted with the identified participants. The interview questions were formulated in English prior to the interviews and later translated into the language of the participants isiXhosa. The participants were encouraged to speak about topics beyond what was listed in the interview guide in order to allow the researcher to gather rich data.

Data Trustworthiness and The Reliability of The Study

To ensure the trustworthiness of the process, more than one research instrument was used. The data were captured employing a voice recorder, and since participants could respond in the vernacular, that served as a strategy for ensuring the reliability of the data. The research was conducted by the researcher and a research assistant, who would share notes after the day's work.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the following ethical principles:
- The negotiation of access with the gatekeepers (traditional leaders and school principals);
- The anonymity of both the research sites and the participants were guaranteed;
- The participants were protected from harm and they were assured that voluntary withdrawal would be respected and not subjected the punitive measures;
- Participant consent was negotiated;
- The use of the voice recorder was negotiated beforehand.

Data Analysis

Constant comparative methods of narrative analysis have been used to evaluate data (Brown & Schulze, 2020). Comparisons were made within and between transcripts, and common themes appeared.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The findings revealed the following patterns in respect of women's approaches to participation:
- Partnerships between young and old women
- Partnerships between women and men

Delegation of power between young and old women

In the meetings which the researcher attended in order to observe proceedings, the men present appeared to dominate the discussions, despite women being in the majority. The younger women gave priority to their elders and showed deference to them. They used 'silence' as a bargaining chip to gain respect and maintain their social status.

> *You must remember that we are people of rules and customs; we are always under the guidance of men. We do things according to the customs that when we meet, the most important word is that of men; we always take men's words as a mark of respect and to show our femininity*

The men also recognised this disposition: As Mr. B stated:

> *Sometimes I do notice that, even though women are in the majority, their presence is not felt… they would be apologetic before they speak and ask whether they have the right to speak... They still observe the old practice that women can't speak in the presence of men, and yet today we are not talking of inkundla*

In the company of older men, some women seemed conditioned by custom and tradition. Invariably, culture seemed more powerful in guiding their actions when it came to participating in school governance-related conversations. The women's silence had meaning, rather than merely reflecting the absence of ideas. Their silence was indicative of respect, honour, and duty, and was also conditional.

> *When a question is asked, we allow older men to speak first… the elders are like our father-in-law and we have to respect them*

As evidence that silence is not a sign of non-participation:

Women are the strongest contributors in meetings in this village… I do not know the reason; perhaps it is because we are the 'sharpest' [well informed]. The women are more educated than men… the majority of men are not educated in this village… but still, we have problems

The tensions and insecurities between women and men, which were raised here. As Bacharach and Mundell (1993) and Naidoo (2005) note, school governance is characterised by conflicts and dilemmas. The above stereotypical comment shows that gendered views might give rise to disagreements (Mead 2017). However, the findings also exposed gender as a state of becoming (Mead 2017). This is especially so when the complex multiplicity of gender is unearthed. The findings seemed to agree with Hall (1996) and Nyamnjoh 2001, respectively. The findings reflect what Kassa (2015), Pippa and Inglahard (2016), and Kiamba (2018) found, namely that the dominant gender enjoys more power than the submissive gender. The findings also seemed to affirm what Brown and Duku (2008), Godwin (2013) and Owiso and Sefa (2017), found, namely that legislative provisions which facilitate participation, do not bring about transformative equality – SASA encourages all voices to be heard, but these women are not speaking up. As the comments indicate, the participating women largely remained silent, but were involved in negotiating and renegotiating their identity (as the sharper and more educated of the two sexes) in order to gain some power through bargaining and negotiation (Rossiter 1999; Brown & Schulze 2002). Bargaining is a component of Arnstein's (1969) ladder of partnership and designated power. In a true partnership, as indicated by Cox (1994), men and women need not have equal skills or even confidence in order to come together and discuss different options which are on the table.

Therefore, the results indicate that women (socially isolated) and men (benefiting from the social structure) agree to share the roles of preparation and decision-making through system such as joint policy boards planning committees and impasse resolution mechanisms. They are not subject to unilateral change after the ground rules have been developed through some sort of give-and-take. This level of participation works most effectively when there is an organized power-base in the community to which the citizen leaders are accountable. This is contradictory with Brown (2005); Thacheen (2005) and Franscisa and Anike (2016) who allude that when poor and privileged parent-groups are gathered, the message of insignificance is often communicated, which leads to social tension, isolation, rejection, domination and psychological stress.

The issue of intentional silence, one young, married female participant (*umakoti*) felt uneasy about speaking, and instead was represented by an older woman, thus making use of representative participation:

I trust and respect umamaKom. So, when I have an issue to raise in a meeting, I talk to her about it and she presents it on my behalf. Sometimes I would not feel confident speaking in the presence of old people. I would feel as though what I am about to say may not be expected of a newly-wed. Sometimes, even if I feel like saying something, I feel scared

Similarly, an unmarried mother, also used representative democracy to communicate her interest in these meetings by making use of her mother as a proxy:

> *I do not consider myself qualified to attend parent meetings… I am not married… My parents are the active ones in these things. They are married, but illiterate … I ask them to play the role on my behalf. I communicate, through them, my ideas and aspirations*

The above citations capture the typical experiences of single females, indicating that their social identity/marital status was important in social interactions. Another approach which women used was to delegate men or older people to "speak on their behalf".

Partnership between women and men

Some women requested men to present their ideas during public meetings, with negotiations reportedly being done before and during the SGB meetings. The participants reported that men and women engaged in informal discussions, information sharing and negotiations before meetings. Then, to respect African culture and tradition, certain men and older women were identified to speak on behalf of younger, married women as well as unmarried mothers. This form of participation can be equated to what Arnstein (1969) categorises under degrees of citizen power. Through partnerships that are formed between the influential (married men and women, older men and women) and the less influential (unmarried women, younger married women), the less influential participants' interests are also represented in meetings. Therefore, despite remaining silent during gatherings, the women are still able to influence decisions by having others speak on their behalf (Amstein 1969; Sanoff 2000).

Representative participation was reportedly widespread in two of the selected sites. For instance, after observing two community meetings where women were generally silent, upon enquiring from some of the participants why that was, one of them, responded:

> *Do you think these men are clever! Women are bright in this village as we are more educated. What we do, in recognition of our culture that we should not be seen disagreeing with our men in public we communicate our interests and stance on certain issues with our male relatives. For instance, the man who spoke the most in the meeting today is my husband. I told him exactly what to say today, on my behalf*

Another female participant, whose husband is reportedly away, working on the mines, added:

> *The men who spoke today I can assure you that they spoke on behalf of certain women. My brother-in-law who sat at the corner in the front row, I sent him to raise certain issues on my behalf... As you know, men do not understand children and their issues*

Her sentiments were supported by another female respondent, a Mrs P:

I always know what my husband is going contribute in meetings. We discuss things at home, especially those that involve children at school. As mothers we know better than fathers. So, in the meetings as he is the head of the family, I let him speak on behalf of our family

This was stated in front of her husband, who boastfully agreed that, as the head (of the family), he would be the one to stand up to represent his household.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study investigated various approaches which women use to participate in the governance of the schools in their respective communities. The findings revealed how women's socialisation shaped their engagement in public decision making in general, and in school governance in particular. The accepted and subscribed democratic social structure benefits males, the elders and married individuals, who participate actively in public discourse. This study found explicit evidence of women wanting to contest male dominance based on stereotyping, even in defiance of their culture. The participating women who were young and unmarried had adopted strategies which enabled them to participate in school governance, and while they are not actively making their voices heard, they are being represented, and are therefore in the process of becoming. Their participation was delegated and representational. Despite there being evidence of tensions between democratic values and the values inherent in African traditions/customs, there was also a suggestion that communities have begun to straddle the gap between democracy and the more paternalistic dispensation of African traditional culture. Implicitly, how Africans interpret their culture and tradition need to occupy a greater part of the discourse on school leadership and policy making. SGB leadership and the school as a whole must be responsive to these activities and must collaborate with local groups to find the best ways to enforce the SASA requirements, while creating an opportunity for all to be heard.

The debate on women's participation is ongoing, and here it was mostly explored and framed using dominant Eurocentric theories. As indicated, in African contexts, participation is multi-layered, and includes a multiplicity of forms of engagement. The approach used mostly is that of cooperation than competition. Encouraging women's participation should be an ongoing process, which should start long before formal, public engagement and discussion occur.

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