

Article

The Lived Experiences of Women Principals in Rural Secondary Schools Regarding their Career Pathways

Joyce F. Mthethwa¹, Azwidohwi P. Kutame¹, Alan B. Buthelezi² and Oluwatoyin A. Ajani^{1, *}

¹Department of Social Sciences Education, University of Zululand, KwaDlangezwa/KZN, South Africa

²Department of Educational Management and Leadership, University of Zululand, KwaDlangezwa/KZN, South Africa

*Corresponding author: oaajani@gmail.com

Abstract: This interpretivist qualitative study explored lived experiences of rural secondary schools' female principals' career development. Purposive sampling technique was employed to select eleven female principals from 11 rural public secondary schools in Ilembe District, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa to provide in-depth information to the study. A semi-structured interview guide was used in various audio-recorded interviews, which lasted between 20-30 minutes each to capture exact information. The audio-recorded data was systematically transcribed and coded to generate common themes for the presentation and discussion of findings. Findings revealed that some communities' cultures continue to dominantly influence women principals' career pathways, despite policies or efforts to promote gender equality in South Africa. The social attitude or 'injustice' against female principals in rural environments has limited their quest to pursue their careers further or to aspire to top administrative leadership positions in education. It is recommended that necessary government structures and other stakeholders in the education sector should provide the necessary support to encourage female principals in rural schools.

Keywords: Female principals, leadership, rural schools, culture, career pathway.

Introduction

Gender inequality in leadership has been a central focus of research in the field of educational administration. Leadership roles were generally held by men. This social attitude or 'injustice' seems to have made women reluctant to pursue a career of their choice including aspiring leadership positions. Literature generally shows that females are under-represented in management positions in both the schooling system (Gobena, 2014; Lunyolo et al, 2014; Uwizeyimana et al, 2014; Burton & Weiner, 2016;) and in higher education (Shava & Ndebele, 2014; Hannum et al, 2015; Austin, 2016, Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Ndebele, 2018). This literature is quiet on the contextualisation of the career pathways of women principals in rural secondary schools. This was confirmed by Ndebele (2018) in his study on gender and school leadership. When females are promoted to management positions in the rural schools, members of the communities, because of their cultural and traditional beliefs, seem to think they may not lead the school effectively.

Luke's (2002) study of women in the schooling system and higher education management in Southeast Asian countries revealed culture-specific dimensions of limiting and enabling factors influencing women's career mobility in those countries. Earlier, Luke (1998: 56) had identified cultural impediments to women leaders unique to these Asian contexts by contextualizing women's career paths, which means "by reference to local sites, socio-political and cultural contexts and histories". This literature, however, is devoid of any discussion of the contextualization of women's career paths in rural settings. The rural context appears to influence female principals' career development in rural communities (Ajani, 2020).

Although the number of women managers in education is growing, women continue to face challenges that prevent them from reaching their full potential as leaders (the Department of Education, 2007; the Department of Basic Education, 2017). Several studies on women and educational leadership have identified various barriers to the career development of female leaders from non-western contexts (Chan, et al., 2016). Although women experience barriers to leadership positions, many of them still find a way to achieve their ultimate goal.

Despite South Africa's pronounced democratic principles, the rural areas are traditionally anchored on the system of 'Izinduna' (leaders delegated by chiefs to act on their behalf), where traditional leaders are recognized leaders. 'Izinduna' still wields powers, and these are men nominated by community members. Assumptions about the gender differences resulting in women being undermined because of their gender make conditions difficult for them to obtain the opportunity to be leaders (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Morley & Crossouard, 2016; Ndebele, 2018). These studies have highlighted the various ways that culture mediates policies and shapes women's career pathways, as well as differences in barriers across countries and the need to examine the complex interplay of multiple factors in diverse cultural contexts. The objective of this study is to explore the lived experiences of rural female school principals in their career pathways, with a case study of secondary school principals in rural areas of the Ilembe District Examples: (Simon 1945) or (Leiter & Maslach 1998).

Literature Review

Oyeniran (2020) found that women continue to face discrimination and subordination despite the existence of numerous international and regional conventions protecting women from harmful treatment and discrimination. Mthethwa (2018), found that members of society perceive men to be the only leaders who can do well in managing schools. In the context of this study, people still believe strongly in these gender stereotypes. Social and cultural expectations or gender stereotypes, contribute to the notion that there are male-specific careers and female-specific careers (Henry, 2018). Oyeniran (2020), discovered that cultural and structural factors, as well as work-home role conflicts, are the main barriers affecting women and their leadership in school management. Stereotypes that favour men and masculinity diminish the value of feminine qualities (Chan et al, 2016).

Males still resist change because of some existing stereotypes implying that females cannot manage effectively when in leadership positions (Mthethwa, 2018). Kelly (2019) confirms that women are not easily socially expected and accepted as leaders because leadership is still regarded as a male activity. Even on issues of professionalism, males still believe that female principals cannot lead them. When societal gender norms assign women differently, and often inferior roles, it shapes not only their career orientations, but also how schools are organized and how people perceive leadership (Chan et al., 2016; Ullah, Ullah, & Bilal, 2020).

Chisholm (2001) demonstrates that South African educational leadership favours males and resists change and that some women who were promoted became dissatisfied and eventually left the education sector. Much of the literature (Hermans et al., 2017; Ellemers, 2018; Julien, 2019), suggests that gender stereotypes embedded in traditionalist beliefs negatively influence attitudes toward career advancement, whereas acceptance of women in the workplace positively influenced these attitudes. Contexts play a role in promoting gender stereotypes. Davis and Bowers (2019) found that the prominence of gender stereotypes is influenced by contexts. The role of women in society continues to hinder their advancement. Jackson (2019) posits that gender differences exist regarding leadership traits and may influence the career pathways of aspiring female leaders. Pathways to principalship may be a process influenced by systemic bias, that ultimately disfavours females (Davies & Bowers, 2019; Jackson, 2019). Ellemers (2018) observes that these differences, prompted by gender stereotypes, can have significant consequences for women's career development, as women are less likely than men to be selected for promotions throughout their careers.

Patriarchal views and power tend to shape the construction of leadership, its culture and practices for centuries (Kennedy, 2019). Kennedy (2019) indicates further that the traditional role expectation of women illustrates the societal hierarchal view to justify the marginalization of women which has a negative impact on their career pathways. Women are not serving in many executive positions as school administrators as men because they are considered male positions. Women are subjugated to men which leads to the systemic oppression of women seeking leadership roles. Many women who possessed the credentials to be school superintendents often found themselves being overlooked for the executive position (Kennedy, 2019).

The way women are accepted in the workplace has a positive effect on their career advancement (Hermans, et al., 2017). Women have been perceived as more effective leaders than men (McIntosh, McQuaid & Munro, 2015). Women are often stereotyped as being more apologetic and women with such qualities often do well in conflict management (Groysberg, 2013). According to Groysberg (2013), being apologetic can be interpreted as owning up to what they have done which is the greatest sign of showing accountability and responsibility which is lacking in most people in leadership positions. Women are perceived as emotional when performing a male role where they remain feminine (Eagly, et al., 2007). Women principals are perceived mostly by female teachers to be too emotional and to be lacking assertiveness when managing conflicts in schools. In immediate responses, women react by feelings.

Overall, in rural communities, most residents do not have high levels of education and believe that a woman's place is in the home (O'Keeffe, 2020). O'Keeffe (2020) argues that these female administrators arrive with high levels of collegiate degrees, make more contributions than many of the local men, and are in positions of authority. However, some communities are ill-prepared for a female leader. O'Keeffe, (2020) believes that due to jealousy, women may not support each other, and this hinders their career development. Sumpter (2010) suggests that women experience interruptions and marginalization in their careers as a result of social attitudes and cultural biases. Other studies (Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Qin, et al. 2019), confirm that gender stereotypes impact women's future career plans, suggesting that they should focus on family rather than on a career. Such suggestions could hinder women from any form of career development they may wish to experience.

Although Zulu men accept that culture and tradition are subject to change, Zulu women still think that they are oppressed due to social conspiracies that are invented by patriarchal men (Langa, 2012). Langa (2012) posits that African women acknowledge they are oppressed, but they choose to adopt a moderate stance in their societies that accommodates the African traditional perspective on dealing with gender inequalities and

biases. Langa (2012) argues further that a Zulu man is the authoritative figure at all times, while a woman is rarely consulted. According to Langa (2012), such beliefs give rise to socially constructed views about women, although South African political developments are considering women for leadership positions. Despite these persisting experiences, some theorists are thinking of strategies to do away with these gender inequalities (Lumby & Azaola, 2011; Edwards, 2018).

Women in South Africa face discrimination in their careers in various sectors (Botes, 2014). An earlier study by Lloyd and Mey (2007) found that discrimination which severely constrains women's career pathways based on stereotyping is complex, arduous and widespread in schools. Some studies (Reyes, 2013; Botes, 2014) suggest that the workplace can become a place where power is abused against women, negatively affecting their career pathways.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach to explore in-depth information on the phenomenon. According to Hennink, et al. (2011), qualitative research studies people in their natural environment to determine how their experiences and behaviour are shaped by the social, economic, cultural, and physical contexts in which they live. It focuses on the 'why?' of social phenomena rather than the 'what?' and it is based on the direct experiences of humans as meaning-making agents in their daily lives. Purposive sampling was employed to select 11 female principals from 11 rural secondary schools in the Ilembe district of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). McMillian and Schumacher (2006; 2014), argue that purposeful sampling identifies 'information-rich' participants who may be knowledgeable about the phenomenon under investigation. The participants were engaged in face-to-face semi-structured interviews (Olson et al., 2020; Haginoya, 2020). The interviews were conducted in their schools as scheduled by the participants.

The study was duly explained to the participants, to gain a clear understanding of the study. Participation was voluntary while informed consent forms were endorsed by these participants before the interviews. All necessary approvals were obtained from the university as well as the Department of Basic Education. The interviews were duly recorded with the permission of the participants. Thematic analysis of the data was ensured through the interpretive paradigm to understand the lived experiences of the participants. According to Hennink, et al. (2011), the interpretive aspect of the approach means that it seeks to understand people's lived experiences from the perspective of the people themselves, which is often referred to as the 'inside' perspective. The authors ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the collected data for dependability, confirmability and transferability. Transcripts were given to the participants to confirm their information. Transparency is of great importance in collecting data, participants were made to listen to the recorded data. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms (Sapsford & Jupp, 2006) have been used to present the participants' verbatim information in the presentation and discussion of the study's findings.

Theoretical Framework

Gender discrimination in leadership positions has continued to be a concern in various spheres of life, including the education sector. Female principals face several challenges in school administration, especially in rural schools. These challenges are rooted in various historical and societal perceptions that undermine females as suitable for leadership roles. A theoretical framework is defined as a systematic method of thinking about and articulating what one intends to study and how (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2013) indicate that a theoretical framework provides clarity and focus on which variables are most important,

which relationships are likely to be most meaningful, and what information should be collected and analysed. A theoretical framework, therefore, completes the research design by providing strong guidance in determining what data needs to be collected and the strategies for data analysis (Yin, 2014).

This study was framed by Archer's theory of social morphogenesis (Archer, 1995; 1996; 2000). This theory holds that understanding experiences and events in the social world requires an identification of the mechanisms from which they emerge. Archer's model of social reality comprises three milieus: structure, culture and agency. According to Archer's (1995; 1996; 2000) theory, culture consists of our value systems, beliefs, attitudes, ideas, ideologies, theories and concepts, which are manifested through discourses used by specific people at specific times (Quinn, 2012). In this study, teachers' and communities' beliefs about the qualities of a good principal as a leader in the school and community, are viewed based on the cultures and traditions of those communities and have a significant impact on how female school principals are accepted in those communities' schools.

Individuals develop descriptive and prescriptive gender role expectations of the behaviour of others based on an evolutionary sex-based division of labour, according to the social role theory (Wood & Eagly, 2012). Cultural and social norms, according to this theory, create a distinction between male and female roles. Women must contend with limited access to social networks (Casciaro & Lobo, 2005). Even when they hold positions of authority, their contributions are undervalued, and tenancy benefits are reduced (Brands & Kilduff, 2013). Some studies claim that women benefit less from supervisor and co-worker support (Geller & Hobfoll, 1994). Gender stereotypes are common and easily and automatically activated in social situations (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Brands & Kilduff, 2013). Each person who enters the team's social context brings pre-existing gender role expectations with them. Individuals, on the other hand, differ in how frequently they stereotype women (Shamir & Howell 1999).

The Findings and Discussion

This qualitative study engaged 11 female principals in semi-structured interviews and was thematically analysed to generate themes for the presentation and discussion of the findings of the study. The table below shows the biographical information of the participants:

Table 1. Biographic information of the participants

Age categories	N	Academic qualifications	N
21- 30 years	1	Diploma	2
31-40 years	-	First degree	3
41-50 years	4	B.Ed. or Honours Degree	3
51 years and older	6	Master's Degree	3
Total	11	Doctoral Degree	11

The majority (76.9%) of participants had 18 years and more of teaching experience in the rural areas where most (60%) of them lived. Their cultural and gender exposure may have helped them understand issues related to the challenges women experience when escalating to higher levels in their careers (Salin, 2021). The majority (86.6%) of these respondents being women, have had first-hand experience during their years of teaching and thus gave their lived experience during interviews. Principal 1 (P1), Principal 2 (P2), to

Principal 11 (P11) have been used for the participants, according to the sampled 11 secondary school principals. Hence, the following themes emanated from the data.

1. Perceptions of the community members' toward female career growth

Participants think that community members' beliefs in rural areas are based on cultural backgrounds. Females do not play any role in community structures. Communities think that women are supposed to be homemakers and should therefore not play any roles of leadership. These include home and religious structures where female roles are severely limited. These limitations adversely affect their career growth. One would expect a church to be encouraging both males and females to be active role players as community leaders. The economy is also affecting these beliefs. Women are being recognised as leaders in some structures including churches as they believe that such leadership is God-ordained (Longman, et al., 2018; Bowie, 2021). This implies that some societies are not influenced by gender stereotype beliefs and where they find themselves, as expressed by one of the principals:

“Even in churches they still consider males rather than females ... in rural schools' community members still believe that women are not good leaders... They believe that females are supposed to stay at home and do the housework. Which is not going to happen in our days. Eeehhh since the economy is going down every day. So...it is very, very important for everybody to work as males. ...modern communities recognise the importance of female pastors” (Principal 6).

The community members also believe that female principals are not getting the same recognition as male principals. Consistent with May and Makura (2020), community members usually treat women in a manner that makes them feel inferior and this may affect their self-esteem, which adversely affects their career pathways. One of the participants confirmed that women principals are often undermined.

2. Perceptions of principals regarding career growth of women in rural areas

The principals' perceptions were that both female and male principals receive the same training as professionals, irrespective of their gender and cultural orientation, therefore, they must be treated equally (Ajani, 2018; 2019). The results further show that hard work is critical in determining who a good leader is. May and Makura's (2020), study, conducted in KwaZulu Natal, suggests that women principals can still qualify to be the best leaders (despite the Zulu culture and beliefs stating that women cannot be leaders but are only fit to look after children and work in the home). Two participants had this to say:

“No...I don't believe that...I believe that everyone is equal, and everyone is capable especially when you are a professional. You can do things because at the universities or colleges we are being trained the same. No one is trained differently. No one is said that eee...because you are a female you are going to be trained differently, and if you are a male you are going to be trained differently. So, it depends. How are...how hard...how you better. And if you are not a hard worker...so...that's the reason why people are just identifying you as a poor leader...or as somebody who failed to perform duties” (Principal 1).

Culture and beliefs may therefore not affect the career pathways of women principals. This is in line with Tantawy (2020) and Ajani (2021, 2022), who indicate that hard work and professional training are critical in

influencing the career growth of women principals. This implies that if women work hard, they may develop in their career growth despite gender stereotypes experienced in rural communities.

3. Cultural stereotypes of career pathways of women

The results show that some stereotypes in the manner in which women are treated in their careers originate from cultural backgrounds. In some cultures, including that of the Zulus, where this study was undertaken, women are undermined by men. The unfair treatment women experience in rural traditional contexts is also experienced in their marriage where they are not recognized as family leaders. This may affect their career growth. As (May and Makura (2020), suggest, even at school, men do not feel comfortable when women are leaders. Against these odds, some women do not consider their gender as an obstacle in their career pathways (Bhatti, & Ali, 2021). One of the participants confirmed tradition and culture have a negative effect on the career pathways of women. The treatment of women in communities affects the way they are treated in the workplace:

“I think our tradition and our culture affects...our...our...our business arena, because, how the women are treated in the community obviously or automatically is going to be the same way you going to be treated in the working environment” (Principal 8).

“In my opinion, women have not been treated fairly. Ever since the culture came into existence. Women are not respected; they are treated as outcasts. Once a man has paid lobola for a woman, that woman becomes his property that can be treated anyhow. I have those who refer to me when they are alone in the staffroom: Lomfazi ucabanga ukuthi uzosienzani...so sometimes you feel that ohh...ok, I... I ...am belittled just because I am a female” (Principal 6).

Unless this cultural perspective changes, women’s career growth may continue to be adversely compromised. Community members even undermine the authority of women who are principals in rural schools. The results further show in some rural communities, males still dominate and still fail to recognize women as leaders as they think women cannot be effective leaders. Women, according to male teachers in some rural schools, are like children and should therefore not be involved when there are critical issues affecting learners to be discussed.

“...he wanted to see the principal, and then when I showed up, he just said there is nothing I can discuss with this child (with emphasis) and this girl (with emphasis). So, I need to see somebody who is a male, so that we can talk some sense because this democracy has allowed women to bahambe phezu kwamakhanda ethu...something like that” (Principal 3).

The environment dictates the extent to which women can be leaders. Educational leadership is still male dominated. This male-dominance scenario in different communities takes away any hope from women to succeed in their careers and as leaders (Kwatubana, 2021). Women end up believing that due to the societal environment, they may not reach that level in the education leadership hierarchy; they may not penetrate the glass ceiling to reach top positions,

“To be honest with you, when I look around the the...circuit managers, and the districts, everywhere, it’s still male-dominated, you know. It looks, very difficult” (Principal 3).

Both Komiti and Moorosi (2020), and Yasmeen and Ali (2020), confirm that female principals think that women who are leaders are expected to behave like males. Such perceptions can only take away the confidence of those whose self-esteem is low. Perceptions are great influence of actions and behaviours at working places, and can significantly influence functionality of a school as a system.

4. Lack of confidence in female principals

Communities show a lack of confidence in women principals. They would behave differently if it were a male principal. Participants revealed that school communities behaved differently to female principals. The participants had these to say:

“And I feel that if it was a male person, they were not going to behave like that ... parents, they will tell you that ai...I am taking my kids to the next school because there is a male principal there” (Principal 6).

Some parents do not have confidence in female leadership (Chyu, et al., 2021). They are not comfortable with taking their children to schools where the principal is a woman. Even when they visit a school where the principal is female, they show a lack of respect without hiding it:

“Some parents think that learner problems can only be resolved if a male parent is talking to a male teacher. Male parents think that women may never resolve any school issues about their children if they are faced with female principals. In their culture, a woman cannot answer a man on any issue that affects a child. Some parents do not accept decisions taken in the presence of a woman regarded as a leader. This behaviour may negatively affect the career growth of women” (Principal 9).

“And some of the parents, also, come with that tendency, thinking that if the school is led by a female, no proper decision can be taken. Just because you are a female” (Principal 3).

“...because he came in with a male teacher, immediately when he stepped into my office, he then said, No sir. I rather speak to you. Not to this woman... I rather go back...to your office we will talk about this man to man. Then you...you...you can see that these learners have learnt in their homes I think that the men will have the last word, or the men will do as they please. And...and men cannot answer to a woman” (Principal 10).

Some find it difficult to recognise women's leadership. Where some community members find a woman being a principal in a school, they choose to communicate with a male teacher despite being directed to the principal who happens to be female. Participants regard this behaviour as discrimination against women in leadership. Even male learners are reluctant to obey instructions from females despite their position. One of the woman principals further remarked:

“I have seen in different instances where communities have to approach the Teacher, they prefer to consult the deputy Teacher who is a male. They think they are not coping, and they are letting the school down. Because of

the comments, they always make when the school has underperformed... I believe they are done because I am a female principal, is when...I will start with the learners. When you speak to the learner, at...at one stage we...we had a problem with one learner whom I believe was under influence of substance...drugs, and then, when they are called to the office, the office...my office is the last place where you push the learner as a teacher” (Principal 7).

5. Contextualisation of the career pathways of women principals

Community structures affect the career pathways of women principals. Despite their position as school principals, women have to do as community structures dictate (Ramsey & Ricket, 2020). This understanding of the control of the social environment affects women who aspire to grow in leadership and want to operate as they deem fit. They feel that their authority is undermined when they are forced by circumstances within communities to accept as expected by communities. Even the level of knowledge and qualification women have in school matters is never considered by communities (Ngadaya, et al., 2021). Leadership abilities in women are undermined by communities, and this affects their career growth negatively. Despite their level of education, it is believed that women belong in the home environment where they should focus on household duties. Rural community beliefs imply that women are not fit to be leaders. For these communities, men should be leaders and their career growth is therefore guaranteed.

“Where I am working, the people who stay in the community, are people who are learned and even though they still consider women as people who should stay at home” (Principal 5).

Other participants had these to say:

“if you are a female, you get that sense of being undermined by other people, regardless of how intelligent you are how educated you may be, or what good a leader you can be. But your gender affects you somehow in leadership” (Principal 3).

“Even though I am the principal of a school, the head of the institution, I have to bow down to the structures in the community” (Principal 5).

Traditional authorities still believe that women may not be included in resolving issues that affect local communities. Gender stereotypes still dominate in traditional rural communities where structures of authority still undermine the leadership abilities of women in their communities. Women principals experience many barriers in communities that suggest leadership to be a male-dominated area. Women principals have to deal with notions of gender stereotypes from male community leaders and are expected to work much harder if they have to succeed as leaders (Shah, 2021). This thinking suggests severe limiting to the career aspirations of women who are working in rural communities where such ideals are still entrenched. Some of the participants in the study expressed how they think about this as follows:

“I operate within the school. I don't interfere much with ehhh...the community things, but what I do...is of consultation with the local municipality...particularly the traditional, so that you are at the same

understanding...level of understanding. So, there is that level of respect...e..e..even in the traditional leadership...at local level...as well as at the highest level” (Principal 4).

“...fact that if you are a female, especially by the tribal authorities, sometimes you undermine the authority of a female leader, believing that there is nothing that makes sense that can be said by a female person” (Principal 3).

Experiences by one of the female principals confirm that some community members do not accept women who are principals. Such community members even think that women do not talk sense. When male parents visit the school for some reason, they are not comfortable meeting and discussing with anybody who is female in the school irrespective of the position this person is holding (Kelly & Senior, 2021). Principal 3, one of the participants asserted that *“those in the schools who are female are treated like small children by males irrespective of whether they are in the school as teachers or outside the school as parents”*. However, another Principal thinks that female principals are usually good leaders even in rural schools. Following are the remarks to confirm this:

“...it was a case by a parent, a male parent, who came to school with a case of ...of...of his granddaughter, and then when he wanted to see the principal, and then when I showed up, he just said there is nothing I can discuss with this child (with emphasis) and this girl (with emphasis). So, I need to see somebody who is a male, so that we can talk some sense. So, I think female principals are good for rural areas, because irural area ento ngi ithanda ngayo, ikuthi they value respect” (Principal 7).

Though some rural communities think that women do not deserve to be leaders, women themselves think that they are and deserve to be respected. What women think about themselves may influence their career success.

6. Cultural beliefs about male dominance in leadership

Culturally, some societies still believe that men will always dominate women. Rural communities are still culturally oriented where men are regarded as leaders. Women principals are undermined and whichever decision they take, may not be taken seriously by communities in rural areas. It may therefore be difficult for women principals in rural areas to pursue their careers.

“Especially in rural areas because there is more ...I can say tradition and culture. There is dominating belief in the masculine than the feminine” (Principal 6).

“But in terms of their culture affecting me as a female person, it goes back to that question of that Grand Baba coming to school, undermining me because I am a woman, and I cannot take decisions. He thought that women should be in the kitchen. and not taking positions in the workplace” (Principal 3).

Because of cultural influence, some communities still expect principals to do some things against the Bill of Rights which is engrained in the school rules and policies. While it is against the law to apply corporal punishment to a learner, some parents think that there is nothing wrong when they beat their children, and

therefore believe that teachers should punish children corporally. Culturally and religiously, a child must be beaten when guilty of an offence. This practice may affect the career of the female principal negatively when coerced by parents to apply it to their children. Should the principal apply corporal punishment, they may be charged thereby ending their career.

“...there are things that ...Zulus want us to do, which are against the rules, like for example, we have to administer corporal punishment, whereas we all know that it is abolished, not allowed, but the parents will come and say in our culture, which is what we do” (Principal 3).

These results imply that cultural influence may have a detrimental effect on the career pathways of women principals in rural areas. Participants reiterated that female principals faced various challenges in the administration of schools in rural schools, due to perceptions of many men who are culturally influenced or believed in patriarchy. Participants believed that female principals were capable and possessed leadership skills to effectively lead schools. The participants demanded support from the community leaders, male colleagues and other members of the school system.

Conclusion

The participants indicated several contextual issues in rural areas as they affected their career pathways as principals in those areas. These contextual issues identified are reported to be the factors that adversely affect the career pathways of women principals. The women reported how they find it difficult to advance their career, either through further studies or growing from the positions they are holding to senior management and leadership positions. Issues identified must therefore be addressed for women to advance in their careers.

Furthermore, the communities in rural areas still recognise their culture and tradition. These beliefs conflict with the foreign culture which encourages a woman who is a leader whereas, according to the local tradition, a woman is never included in leadership structures. Women in such communities would therefore find it difficult to lead where women's leadership is not recognized. Women principals also face some challenges when they apply for promotional posts in rural schools where gender stereotypes are still dominant. Hence, some communities' cultures are so dominant that they continue to influence the career pathways of women principals despite efforts to encourage equality among all persons. This social attitude or 'injustice' in these rural environments made women reluctant to pursue their careers and emulate top administrative leadership positions.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends that the women principals need to be transparent for them to succeed in managing the school in rural areas. Open communication is critical. Furthermore, for principals to find it easy to work in the schools they are managing, they must avoid dictating to those they relate with despite their limited knowledge in educational matters. There is also the need for Women principals need to take their jobs seriously and take every step cautiously as they are viewed differently from men. They should know that every step they take while in those communities, is viewed critically. Principals must always support their teachers. When teachers feel supported, they in turn will support their principals. Communities can therefore learn from the harmonious relationship among people who serve them.

Acknowledgement: The authors wish to acknowledge the participants for this study for their useful and in-depth information, The University of Zululand is also acknowledged for the support towards this project.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all the participants for the this study, before the commencement of the interviews.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Ajani, O. A. (2018). Needs for in-service professional development of teachers to improve students' academic performance in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Arts Social Sci J*, 9(330), 2. <https://doi.org/10.4172/2151-6200.1000330>.
- Ajani, O. A. (2019). Understanding teachers as adult learners in professional development activities for enhanced classroom practices. *AFFRIKA Journal of Politics, Economics and Society*, 9(2), 195-208. <https://doi.org/10.31920/2075-6534/2019/9n2a10>.
- Ajani, O. A. (2020). Teachers' professional development in South African high schools: how well does it suit their professional needs? *African Journal of Development Studies*, 10(3), 59. <https://doi.org/10.31920/2634-3649/2020/10n3a4>.
- Ajani, O. A. (2021). Teachers' perspectives on professional development in South Africa and Nigeria: Towards an andragogical approach. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 11(3), 288-288. <https://doi.org/10.36941/jesr-2021-0070>.
- Ajani, O. A. (2022). Exploring the Teacher Professional Development Activities: Perspectives of Nigerian High School Teachers. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 21(6). <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.21.6.3>.
- Archer, M.S. (1995). *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*. Cambridge University Press.
- Archer, M.S. (1996). *Culture and Agency. The Place of Culture in Social Theory*. Cambridge University Press.
- Archer, M.S. (2000). *Being Human: The Problem of Agency*. Cambridge University Press.
- Austin, M. (2016). Women in education, science and leadership in New Zealand: a personal reflection. *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(5), 914-919. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1147725>.
- Bastian, B. L., Metcalfe, B. D., & Zali, M. R. (2019). Gender Inequality: Entrepreneurship Development in the MENA Region. *Sustainability*, 11(22), 6472.
- Bauch, P. A. (2001). School-community partnerships in rural schools: Leadership, renewal, and a sense of place. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 76(2), 204-221. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327930pje7602_9.
- Bello, D., Kwok, L., Radebaugh, L., Tung, R. L., & Van Witteloostuijn, A. (2009). From the editors: Student samples in international business research. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 40(3): 361–364.
- Bosak, J., Eagly, A., Diekmann, A., & Sczesny, S. (2018). Women and men of the past, present, and future: evidence of dynamic gender stereotypes in Ghana. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 49(1), 115-129.
- Botes, W. (2014). *Female teachers' experiences of senior male colleagues' exercising of power in schools* (Doctoral dissertation). Potchefstroom: North-West University
- Brands, R. A., & Kilduff, M. (2013). Just like a woman? Effects of gender-biased perceptions of friendship network brokerage on attributions and performance. *Organization Science*, 25(5), 1530-1548.
- Brunner, C. C., & Kim, Y. L. (2010). Are women prepared to be school superintendents? An essay on the myths and misunderstandings. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 5(8), 276-309.

- Casciaro, T., & Lobo, M. S. (2005). Competent jerks, lovable fools, and the formation of social networks. *Harvard business review*, 83(6), 92-99.
- Chan, A. K. W., Ngai, G. S. K., & Choi, P. K. (2016). Contextualising the career pathways of women principals in Hong Kong: A critical examination. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 46(2), 194-213.
- Chen, X. P., Eberly, M. B., Chiang, T. J., Farh, J. L., & Cheng, B. S. (2014). Affective trust in Chinese leaders: Linking paternalistic leadership to employee performance. *Journal of Management*, 40(3), 796-819.
- Chira, S. (2017, July 21). *Why women aren't C.E.O's, according to women who almost were*. New York Times.
- Chisholm, L (2001) Gender and leadership in South African administration. *Gender and Education*, 13(4), 387-399.
- Coleman, M. (2003). Gender and the orthodoxies of leadership. *School leadership & management*, 23(3), 325-339.
- Collins, S. D. (2020). *Career Paths, Responsibilities, Barriers, and Affirmations of Exemplary Female Elementary School Principals* (Doctoral dissertation). Mississippi State University.
- Cornwall, A. (2016). Women's empowerment: What works? *Journal of International Development*, 28(3), 342-359.
- Davies, A. & Bowers, M. (2019). *The pipeline plan that will drain the lower Darling River dry.* The Guardian Newspaper. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/jan/23/the-pipeline-plan-that-will-drain-the-lower-darling-river-dry>.
- Davis, A., & Johansson, O. (2005). Gender and school leadership in Sweden. In Collard, J. & Reynolds, C. (Eds.), *Leadership, Gender and Culture in Education: male and female perspectives*, (pp 38-49). Open University Press
- Davis, B. W., & Bowers, A. J. (2019). Examining the career pathways of educators with superintendent certification. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 55(1), 3-41.
- Davis, D.R., & Maldonado, C. (2015). Shattering the Glass Ceiling: The Leadership Development of African American Women in Higher Education. *Advancing Women in Leadership*, 35, 48-64. https://advancing-women.com/awl/awl_wordpress/ISSN_1093-7099.
- Department of Basic Education. (2017). *Rural Education Draft Policy*. South Africa.
- Department of Education (2007). *Women in and into management and leadership positions*. Government Press.
- Diale, C. D. (2016). *Black African women in South African male-dominated entrepreneurial environments* (Doctoral dissertation), University of Pretoria.
- Eagly, A. H. (1997). Sex differences in social behaviour: Comparing social role theory and evolutionary psychology. *American Psychologist*, 52(12), 1380-1383.
- Eagly, A. H. (2013). *Sex differences in social behaviour: A social role interpretation.*, Psychology Press.
- Eagly, A. H., & Karau, S. J. (2002). Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychological Review*, 109(3), 573-598.
- Eagly, A. H., Eagly, L. L., & Carli, L. L. (2007). *Through the labyrinth: The truth about how women become leaders*. Harvard Business Press.
- Eagly, A. H., Makhijani, M. G., & Klonsky, B. G. (1992). Gender and the evaluation of leaders: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 111(1), 3-22.
- Eagly, A.H. & Schmidt, M.C. (2001). The leadership styles of women and men. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57(4), 781-797.
- Edwards, G. (2018). Feminist Approaches to Educational Leadership in Disadvantaged Rural Communities. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 6(7), 1619-1628. <https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2018.060722>.
- Ellemers, N. (2018). Gender stereotypes. *Annual review of psychology*, 69, 275-298. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-122216-011719>.

- Geller, P. A., & Hobfoll, S. E. (1994). Gender differences in job stress, tedium and social support in the workplace. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 11(4), 555-572.
- Gobena, L. (2014). *Major factors that affect female teachers' participation in school leadership: The case of public primary schools in Jimma Town*. (Unpublished Masters Dissertation). Jimma University. <http://open-docs.ids.ac.uk/pendocs/handle/123456789/5474>.
- Gresham, G., & Sampson, P. (2019). Women Superintendent Research: 2014-2016 Dissertation Literature Review Content Analysis. *Athens Journal of Education*, 6(4), 257-270. <https://doi.org/10.30958/aje.6-4-1>.
- Groysberg, B. (2013). *Gender Differences in Leadership Styles and the impact within corporate boards*. Brighton: Harvard Business School.
- Haginoya, S., Yamamoto, S., Pompedda, F., Naka, M., Antfolk, J., & Santtila, P. (2020). Online simulation training of child sexual abuse interviews with feedback improves interview quality in Japanese university students. *Frontiers in psychology*, 11, 998. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00998>.
- Hannum, K.M., Muhly, S.M., Zalabak, P.S.S., White, J.S. (2015). Women Leaders within Higher Education in the United States: Supports, Barriers, and Experiences of Being a Senior Leader. *Advancing Women in Leadership*, 35, 65-75. http://advancingwomen.com/awl/awl_wordpress/.
- Harris, L. U., & Trnavčević, A. (2020). Women in education management in Kosovo: A hard road less travelled. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 9(1), 136-136. <https://doi.org/10.36941/ajis-2020-0012>.
- Hennink, M., Hutter, I., & Bailey, A. (2011). Participant recruitment. *Qualitative Research Methods*. Sage Publications Ltd, 81-107.
- Henry, K. A. (2018). *A Single Case Study to Investigate United States Army Female Officers' Promotion Disparities* (Doctoral dissertation). The University of the Rockies.
- Hermans, M., Newburry, W., Alvarado-Vargas, M. J., Baldo, C. M., Borda, A., Durán-Zurita, E. G., ... & Olivas-Lujan, M. R. (2017). Attitudes towards women's career advancement in Latin America: The moderating impact of perceived company international proactiveness. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 48(1), 90-112.
- Howe-Walsh, L., & Turnbull, S. (2016). Barriers to women leaders in academia: tales from science and technology. *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(3), 415-428. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.929102>.
- Hoyt, C. L., & Murphy, S. E. (2016). Managing to clear the air: Stereotype threat, women, and leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 27(3), 387-399. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2015.11.002>.
- Hoyt, C. L., & Simon, S. (2017). Social psychological approaches to women and leadership theory. In *Handbook of Research on Gender and Leadership*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Irene, D. J. A., & Ongachi, W. M. (2011). Teaching conflict management skills in schools: Prerequisite for peace and achievement of millennium development goals in Kenya. *Educational Research and Reviews*, 6(17), 902-905.
- Jackson, P. (2019). *Exploring the Lived Experience of Female Presidents in Higher Education: A Journey of Ascension to the Rural Community College Presidency* (Doctoral dissertation), Eastern Kentucky University.
- Jarvis, P. (2013). *Universities and corporate universities: The higher learning industry in a global society*. Routledge, University Press.
- Julien, S. (2019). *A Narrative Study Exploring How Women of Color Leaders' Meaning-making Shape Their Professional and Personal Experiences in K-12 International Schools* (Doctoral dissertation), North-Eastern University.
- Kanjere, M.M. (2008) Challenges faced by women leaders. University of Limpopo, Limpopo, South Africa. <https://www.emasa.co.za/files/full/Kanjere.pdf>.

- Kelly, C. E. (2019). *Women in Canadian Independent School Leadership: Perceptions, Career Patterns, and Possibilities* (Doctoral dissertation). Toronto University of Toronto.
- Kelsey, C., Allen, K., Coke, K., & Ballard, G. (2014). Lean in and Lift up: Female Superintendents Share Their Career Path Choices. *Journal of Case Studies in Education*, 6, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.17226/18810>.
- Kennedy, A. (2019). *African American Women Superintendents: Are We Being Marginalized?* A D.Ed. Dissertation). Morgan State University.
- Langa, M. L. (2012). *Some gendered practices in a Zulu family: a feminist perspective* (Doctoral dissertation). University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Liu, S., & Hallinger, P. (2018). Teacher development in rural China: how ineffective school leadership fails to make a difference. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 21(6), 633-650.
- Lloyd, H. R., & Mey, M. R. (2007). Gender differences in perceptions of workplace progression: an automotive industry case study. *Southern African Business Review*, 11(3), 95-120.
- Longman, K.A., & Anderson, P.S. (2016). Women in Leadership: The Future of Christian Higher Education. *Christian Higher Education*, 15(1-2), 24-37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2016.1107339>.
- Luke, C. (1998). Cultural Politics and Women in Singapore Higher Education Management. *Gender and Education* 10 (3): 245–263.
- Luke, C. (2002). Globalization and Women in Southeast Asian Higher Education Management. *Teachers College Record* 104 (3): 625–662.
- Lumby, J., & Azaola, C. (2011). Women principals in small schools in South Africa. *Australian Journal of education*, 55(1), 73-85.
- Lunyolo, G.H., Ayodo, T.M.O., Tikoko, B., & Simatwa, E.M.W. (2014). Socio-cultural Factors that Hinder Women's Access to Management Positions in Government Grant Aided Secondary Schools in Uganda: The Case of Eastern Region. *Educational Research*, 5(7), 241-250. <https://doi.org/10.14303/er.2014.200>.
- Malefane, S. R. (2001). *Determining and prioritising the physical service needs of the Ikageng community* (Doctoral dissertation). Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education).
- McIntosh, B., McQuaid, R. & Munro, A. (2015). The impact of gender perceptions and professional values on women's careers in nursing. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 30(1), 26-43.
- McMillan, J. H., & Schumacher, S. (2014). Education research: Evidence-based inquiry: *Pearson Higher Education*. 27(1), 129-146.
- McMillan, J.H., & Schumacher, S. (2006). *Research in Education*. New York: Harper College Publishers.
- Merriam-Webster, D. (2015). pp. 1-5. *Merriam-Webster*.
- Miles, M. B.; Huberman, A. M.; Saldaña, J. (2013). *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*. 3rd. ed.) Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Montgomery, M. L. (2019). *The Impact of Male Gender Dissonance on Women's Potential Eligibility for Advancement to K-12 Public School Superintendent*. (Doctoral dissertation). Brandman University.
- Moorosi, P. (2020). South African female principals' career paths: Understanding the gender gap in secondary school management. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 38(5), 547-562.
- Morley, L., & Crossouard, B. (2016). Gender in the neoliberalised global academy: the affective economy of women and leadership in South Asia. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 37(1), 149-168. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.1100529>.
- Moyo, Z., & Perumal, J. (2019). Challenges faced by teachers living with HIV. *South African Journal of Education*, 39(1), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v39n1a1490>.

- Mthethwa, J.F. (2018). *Female principals' skills of managing conflict in primary schools dominated by female teachers in the Gingindlovu circuit*. (Masters Dissertation), University of Zululand.
- Naidoo, B., & Perumal, J. (2014). Female principals leading at disadvantaged schools in Johannesburg, South Africa. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 42(6), 808-824.
- Ndebele, C. (2018). Gender and School Leadership: Breaking the Glass Ceiling in South Africa. *Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies*, 7(2), 1582-1605.
- O'Keeffe, E. L. M. (2020). *Uncharted Territory: The Professional, Gendered Experiences of Female Rural Superintendents in the Twenty-First Century*. (Doctoral dissertation), Miami University.
- Olson, K., Smyth, J. D., Dykema, J., Holbrook, A. L., Kreuter, F., & West, B. T. (2020). The past, present, and future of research on interviewer effects. In *Interviewer effects from a total survey error perspective* (pp. 3-16). Chapman and Hall/CRC Press.
- Oyeniran, R. (2020). How do females deal with hindrances in School Headship? Evidences from the Ivorian Context. *European Journal of Educational Sciences*, 7(2), 116-135. <https://doi.org/10.19044/ejes.v7no2a8>.
- Pashiardis, P., Savvides, V., Lytra, E., & Angelidou, K. (2011). Successful school leadership in rural contexts: The case of Cyprus. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 39(5), 536-553.
- Qin, L., Torres, M. & Madsen, J. (2019). Building Pathways: Nurturing a Female Generation of School Leaders in China. *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership*. 217, 1-24. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/jwel/217>.
- Quinn, L. (2012). Enabling and constraining conditions for academic staff development. In: L. Quinn (Ed.): *Reimagining Academic Staff Development: Spaces for Disruption*, pp. 27- 50. SUN MeDIA Stellenbosch.
- Ramsey, C., & Rickett, A. (2020). Examining Physical Space, Leadership Inheritance, and “Authentic” Community Engagement through Co-Constructed Autoethnography. *American Journal of Qualitative Research*, 4(3), 161-178.
- Sanchez, J. E., & Thornton, B. (2010). Gender issues in K-12 educational leadership. *Advancing Women in Leadership Journal*, 30(13). https://doi.org.advancingwomen.com/awl/awl_wordpress.
- Sandberg, S. (2013). *Lean in: Women, work, and the will to lead*. New York. Random House.
- Sapsford R. & Jupp, V. (2006). *Data collection and analysis and Ed*. London: Sage and the Open University.
- Shamir, B., & Howell, J. M. (1999). Organizational and contextual influences on the emergence and effectiveness of charismatic leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 10(2), 257-283.
- Shava, G. N., Tlou, F. N., & Mpofu, M. (2019). Challenges facing women in leadership positions: Experiences from a district in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 10(14), 30-40. <https://doi.org/10.7176/jep/10-14-05>.
- Shava, G.N., Ndebele, C. (2014). Challenges and Opportunities for Women in Distance Education Management Positions: Experiences from the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). *Journal of Social Science*, 40(3), 359-372.
- Starr, K., & White, S. (2008). The small rural school principalship: Key challenges and cross-school responses. *Journal of Research in Rural Education (Online)*, 23(5), 1.
- Subramanian, M. (2019). *Examining the Potential Difference in Leadership Style by Male and Female Leaders of the Information Technology Industry* (Doctoral dissertation), Colorado Technical University.
- Sumpter, D. J. (2010). *Career Advancement for Women: What Is the Prescribed Path for Success?* Defence acquisition university. Huntsville al. Aberdeen Proving Ground, DAU Senior Service College Fellowship.
- Superville, D. R. (2016). Few women run school districts. Why? *Education Week*, 36(13), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.21236/ada549379>.
- Toprak, M., Karakus, M., & Chen, J. (2019). Teachers' attitudes towards their school managers and their intent to leave: A gender-moderated model. *Current Psychology*, 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-019-00537-x>.

- Ullah, R., Ullah, H., & Bilal, M. (2020). Biological versus Feminists Perspectives on Girls' Underperformance in STEM Subjects in Pakistan. *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ)*, 4(1), 10-18. <https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.lassij/4.1.2>.
- Uwizeyimana, D.E., Modiba, N.S., & Mathevula, N.S. (2014). Barriers to Women's Promotion in Primary School Management Positions. *Journal of Social Science*, 41(3), 353-362.
- Wasike, L. N. (2020). *Actual Progress or Stagnation? Exploring the State of Women's Education in Western Kenya* (Doctoral dissertation), Bowling Green State University.
- West, A. B. A. (2018). *African American Women in New York State Who Overcame Barriers to Become Superintendents of Schools*.
- White, S. (2018). Opportunities and Barriers to Female Leadership in Secondary Education: A Qualitative Analysis. In *Point Park University Conference Proceedings* (pp. 133-150).
- Wood, W., & Eagly, A. H. (2012). Biosocial construction of sex differences and similarities in behaviour. In *Advances in experimental social psychology*, 46, (55-123).
- Yin, R.K. (2014). *Case study research and methods* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, California.
- Zhang, X. (2010). Nuren Jiaoshu Nanren Guanxiao Xianxiang Tanxi [An Analysis of the Phenomenon of 'Women Teaching and Men Managing in School']. *Jiaoyu Fazhan Yanjiu*, 30-36.
- Zuma, N. (2018). *Experiences and practices of black women teachers: a case study of a rural secondary school in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa* (Doctoral dissertation); Durban, Durban University of Technology.