Women's Educational Leadership Experiences: Career Advancement in the Lubombo Region of Eswatini

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Abstract: Women's progress in leadership roles within the field of education has made limited headway despite the efforts of government institutions and progressive policies aimed at addressing diversity and equity practices. This study seeks to investigate the experiences of women in leadership within the Department of Education in Lubombo Region of Eswatini. Adopting a qualitative approach, this study employs an interpretive paradigm and a phenomenological design to delve into the lived experiences of female leaders and their interpretation of these experiences. Twelve female principals from 12 high schools were purposefully selected to participate in this study. Semi-structured interviews, conducted with audio recordings, were used to guide the data generation process. The collected data were systematically transcribed, coded, and analysed thematically. Feminist theory serves as the foundation of this study, guiding the retrospective storytelling process aimed at understanding the experiences of women in leadership. Despite the implementation of regulations and other initiatives, gender equality in Eswatini has not progressed significantly. The findings of this study reveal that deeply ingrained traditional beliefs, rooted in the customs and values of local communities, continue to strongly influence promotion decisions within the educational system. The resistance observed reflects a deeply entrenched belief that female principals have limited opportunities for upward mobility in leadership due to the societal stigma or "injustice prejudice" that permeates government institutions. This study recommends that government entities and other stakeholders embark on new leadership training programs that prioritise progressive ethos, values, and culture within the education industry.

Keywords: Female principals, leadership, high schools, career advancement.

1. Introduction

Women make up half of the world's population (Ilo, 2019). However, they do not actively participate in society's social, economic, political, and cultural development like men do (Henry, 2018). Given the opportunity, women would make great strides in their academic development. Despite the exponential increase in women's educational attainment, positions of authority in the education fraternity are reserved for men (Grogan & Brunner, 2019). Lennon (2021) concurs with Grogan and Brunner that, comparatively speaking, few women are promoted to powerful positions in educational institutions. In the pool of prospective leaders, women outnumber men substantially (Grogan & Brunner, 2019). The only logical conclusion derived from this is that women face discrimination at work and are viewed as inferior to their male counterparts, regardless of their professional and academic attainment and qualifications.

In many countries, there are generally more women working in positions of leadership today than ever before (Coleman, 2022). However, women in developing countries continue to be disproportionately underrepresented in positions of leadership across many professional sectors,

including schools. Although the managerial profession has always been seen as a man's domain, this image is shifting. Schools and other organisations share the same situation. The number of female principals is rising steadily due to changes in attitudes, allowing women to successfully hold such prominent roles as well. Similarly, other studies have discovered gender discrepancies in school leadership. According to data from the TALIS 2018 result (OECD, 2020), only 48% of lower secondary school leaders are female, compared to 68% of instructors. In line with this trend, the Global School Leaders survey from 2020 found that only 50% of school leaders in India, Indonesia, Kenya, and Malaysia self-identified as women, compared to more than 70% of instructors (Global School Leaders, 2020). This evidence shows that women are still underrepresented in positions of leadership. To expand women's participation and move towards gender equality in school leadership, specific policy and programmatic measures are required. Therefore, this research aims to understand the main obstacles that prevent women from advancing to higher-level educational roles. Specifically, the study examined:

- Personal factors that hinder women from advancing to higher-level educational roles.
- Organisational factors that hinder women from advancing to higher-level educational roles.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study utilises theories rooted in women's inadequate representation in leadership, specifically feminist theories, to explore the experiences of female principals in leadership and management. According to feminist ideology, all feminists are concerned about the unfair treatment of women in society and work towards improving their own lives and relationships with men (Budgeon, 2021). Greyling and Steyn (2015) state that feminism aims to achieve justice for females and eliminate gender inequality. According to feminism, women are not treated equally to men. Therefore, the promotion of women's liberation and justice is necessary (Hartmann, 2015).

It is assumed that treating women equally to men will contribute to the possibility of efficient school administration (Moorosi, 2020). This study is situated within feminist theory because it provides a clearer understanding of the current situation in Eswatini High Schools. The underrepresentation of women in principal roles, especially in high schools, can be explained by feminist theory (Greyling & Steyn, 2015).

Although feminists share the objective of emancipating women, Greyling and Steyn (2015) note that women's conditions and experiences can vary and even conflict. This demonstrates that there is no one unified feminist school of thought to explain women's difficulties. For this reason, the theoretical framework for this study combines the ideas of radical feminists and liberal feminists. According to these feminists, power is a dynamic that exists across society and is not confined to any particular group (Yousaf & Schmiede, 2016).

Radical feminists argue that gender inequality forms the foundation of all other forms of inequality and opportunity (Vukoiĉiĉ, 2017). Reynolds (2003) agrees with Weiner (1994) that radical feminism views female oppression as the primary manifestation of male dominance and that patriarchal authority comes from the social interpretation of biological sexual differences between men and women. Weeks (2023) argues that school management is an area where men have historically dominated, and this dominance is reinforced by men's numerical superiority and a specific form of masculinity within the organisation (Grogan, 2010). This study is framed within radical feminism because the experiences of female managers result from male dominance, and female managers must navigate their managerial responsibilities in a way that appeals to men. According to radical feminism, men and women should have equal rights (Grogan, 2010).

However, liberal feminist theory challenges the notion that women are men's property and views patriarchy as the source of male dominance, exploitation, and oppression of women (Acker, 1987). This study is located within liberal feminism because it focuses on women who lack human rights

and may not be perceived as capable of holding prominent positions in society. Furthermore, this theory is useful in empowering female department heads and deputy principals to see themselves as competent, successful, and capable educators who meet the requirements for becoming principals. This particular theoretical framework was chosen because female educators have long been denied senior roles as high school principals due to discrimination from their male counterparts.

Using the influence of radical and liberal theories, this study employs an interpretive and qualitative method to gain a comprehensive understanding of the perceptions and experiences of female educational leaders in their career pathways. Through interviews, women leaders share their experiences, as the primary objective of feminist perspectives is to bring women's perspectives and experiences to the forefront (Carralero, 2024).

3. **Literature Review**

To understand why equal representation in leadership is taking so long to arrive, this part of the study examines how the literature conceptualises and discusses the obstacles that hinder the career development of female leaders. Therefore, this section assesses a wide range of potential influences on the career paths of female leaders in professional disciplines.

3.1 Career path

A career is defined as a structured series of professional activities that span a significant period of time, offering opportunities for growth through recognised stages of preparation and promotion based on merit and maintaining integrity (Shakeshaft, 2015). In this study, we examine a career as both an individual's life path and progression, as well as a job that provides prospects for advancement. It is commonly believed that women prioritise marriage soon after starting their careers. However, the reality is quite the opposite - men tend to place more emphasis on their career prospects, resulting in more clearly defined professional paths compared to women. If a husband decides to relocate, the wife typically follows him (Nash, 2020), but the husband may not permit his wife to pursue a promotion elsewhere. This conflict leads to unnecessary delays in women's career advancement. When aspiring for leadership roles, women often find themselves older than their male counterparts in equivalent positions (Mbithuka, 2019).

Moreover, women were historically prohibited from working outside the home, while it was acceptable for men to do so. Over time, this norm has shifted, and women are now also encouraged to pursue employment (Ajani, 2021). Teaching became a respected profession for women despite facing initial resistance from the educational community despite their increasing numbers. However, although teaching is now predominantly female, very few women hold leadership positions. This can be attributed to gender stereotypes that perpetuated the belief that women were better suited for childrearing, which significantly influenced the structure and organisation of schools (Strober & Tyack, 2019). These biases have a negative impact on how women perceive themselves regarding leadership roles. Henry (2018) asserts that societal and cultural expectations contribute to the notion that certain jobs are only suitable for men while others are only suitable for women. Mthethwa (2018) claims that only male managers are considered capable of effectively leading schools. As a result of this criticism, women may view themselves as less capable and deserving of leadership positions, causing them to delay pursuing their professional careers in becoming school principals. In the context of this study, gender stereotypes still persist in society and hinder women from attaining leadership positions.

3.2 Women's self-image and leadership

A positive self-perception is essential for leadership (Gerzema & D'Antonio, 2021). Without it, opportunities for growth and noteworthy achievements diminish. It is often said that confidence is crucial for earning the respect of peers and others and for being seen as a future leader. However,

there are differences between male and female leaders when it comes to the advantages of displaying assurance (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2020). Research has shown that some women are underrepresented in leadership positions due to low self-esteem, which leads to a lack of confidence and assertiveness (Mthembu, 2016; Mberia, 2017; Mythili, 2017). Smith (2015) found that many women internalise societal views and expectations about their roles, conforming to gender stereotypes. This acceptance can result in a negative self-perception and a belief that they do not possess the qualities and traits required for leadership. Wrushen and Sherman (2019) also noted that some women feel uncomfortable identifying themselves as powerful. Coleman (2022) emphasises that women may be hesitant to pursue higher positions or apply for jobs unless they are certain they meet all the qualifications. This suggests that women need reassurance before embracing the idea of becoming leaders and often rely on others to make decisions and handle important matters in their lives. Mwila (2021) argued that women workers may avoid taking on responsibilities and use feminism as an excuse when faced with challenges.

3.3 Satisfaction with their teaching positions

Studies have shown that women are satisfied with their level 1 teaching positions and lack the willingness to challenge leadership roles. It is worth considering whether their satisfaction with teaching is a result of socialisation. Khumalo (2021) argues that socialisation is a process that empowers individuals by teaching them how to internalise organisational principles that have been imparted to them by significant others. In essence, culture plays a significant role in perpetuating gender inequality by allowing men to dominate leadership positions, and many men bring this mentality into their workplaces. Similarly, women have been socialised to be mothers and caregivers, which reinforces gender inequality and leads them to settle for less in the workplace. This, in turn, widens the under-representation and leadership gap. Research from Ethiopia supports this idea, revealing that while 42% of teachers were female, they were predominantly in low-level positions (Grant Thornton International Business Report, 2023). These statistics help explain the gender disparities in leadership within the education field. Additionally, women tend to be more satisfied with their academic qualifications and long years of teaching experience compared to men, leading to a lack of ambition to pursue top positions or actively develop their careers (Gaus, 2021).

3.4 Failure to control emotions

Women who assume masculine roles while still maintaining their femininity are often perceived as being emotional (Eagly, 2007). This perception can hinder their selection for leadership positions, as they may be seen as lacking self-control, especially when it comes to minor issues (Pirouznia, 2021). It is essential for all leaders to be able to manage their emotions effectively, regardless of gender, as they interact with a diverse range of subordinates. However, women are frequently labelled as more emotional and more prone to emotional reactions in situations that require logical thinking, which can lead to misjudgments and hinder their decision-making process (Pirouznia, 2021). Within the workplace, women are often seen as highly emotional individuals who struggle to handle situations when things do not go their way. They may display anger and have difficulty controlling their temper, which has become a stereotype associated with them (Jackson, 2019).

Additionally, women have been perceived as quick to react without gathering all the relevant facts in workplace incidents. Ajani (2021) points out that women are often seen as holding grudges, being unforgiving, and having a hard time forgetting when they have been wronged. These attitudes, as perceived by Ajani (2021), can strain their relationships with their subordinates and lead to biases from their male counterparts. Consequently, many women opt to avoid such conflicts by refraining from pursuing leadership roles and instead focusing on subordinate tasks. The way women handle their emotions has contributed to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions.

4. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research approach rooted in the interpretative paradigm (Makura, 2010). According to McKie (2002) and Flick (2014), the qualitative method is the most suitable for gaining a deeper understanding of the issues being investigated. In this study, a phenomenological approach was taken to explore the lived experiences of individuals and identify relevant phenomena (Hall et al., 2016). By using a phenomenological lens, we were able to uncover the challenges faced by women in leadership as they strive to advance to senior positions. Purposive sampling and homogeneity were used to select twelve (12) female principals as participants who could provide rich information about their experiences and shed light on the under-representation of women in leadership roles within high schools. McMillan and Schumacher (2014) support this choice of sampling method as it allows for the selection of individuals who possess valuable knowledge on the subject being investigated.

To ensure ethical compliance, the researcher obtained an ethical clearance certificate (UZREC 171110-030) from the university. Participants were fully informed about their rights, dignity, and privacy and were provided with a consent form and information sheet prior to their involvement in the study. Data was collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews and focus groups with the participants (Olson et al., 2020; Haginoya, 2020). The interviews focused on the participants' professional experiences and aspirations to advance in their respective fields or workplaces. With the participants' consent, the interviews were recorded for transcription and analysis purposes. The final transcripts were shared with the participants for verification and accuracy as part of the member-checking process.

Thematic analysis was used to qualitatively analyse the data and address the main research question. This analysis aimed to fully understand the lived experiences of the participants. Member checking was employed to uphold the quality and rigour of the research (Adkins & Chauvin, 2020). The researcher also adhered to the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to ensure the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participant confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by using codes and pseudonyms to present their verbatim information.

5. The Findings and Discussion

The objective of this study was to determine the experiences faced by female principals as they advance to their positions at high schools in the Lubombo region of Eswatini. Information was gathered from 12 female principals through face-to-face interviews and focus groups, revealing several themes. Participants' opinions were recorded verbatim, and for the presentation and discussion of the results, the data was processed and thematically synthesised. The themes that emerged from the collected data, in line with the study's objective, include the following factors: These factors were divided into two categories: personal (self-inflicted) issues, such as lack of confidence and family attachments, and organisational (externally motivated) elements, such as sexual harassment, corruption, and recruitment processes.

5.1 Personal (self-inflicted) issues

In this section, we highlight respondents' perspectives on personal factors, such as women's attitudes toward their families and how they perceive themselves. Research has revealed several personal reasons that discourage women from assuming leadership positions (Dang, 2017). According to this study, personal obstacles that prevent women from rising to leadership positions include a lack of confidence and family attachment.

Theme 1: Lack of confidence

Participants clearly pointed out that some female teachers tend to decline leadership appointments due to a lack of confidence and assertiveness. They emphasised that a great leader must possess confidence, and the absence of it results in the underrepresentation of women in higher positions. This point is further supported by FP2's comment below.

> FP2: *"Women tend/turn to have little faith in themselves. They do not trust their knowledge and skills when it comes to leadership. They tend/turn to be intimidated by men who are amongst the team they are leading. Leadership needs someone who has a lot of confidence and no fear of making bold decisions. Women do have confidence issues. They are afraid of being in the limelight."*

Indeed, the comment above perpetuates the stereotype that women lack self-belief and feel less confident in their abilities than men. It suggests that women cannot make decisions independently, always seeking approval from men, even their subordinates. FGP11 witnessed such an act and commented as follows.

> FGP11: *"When I make decisions as a principal, I'll sometimes consult my male teachers just like my mother did, consult my father with almost everything. I was afraid and the feeling "what if it's a wrong decision'. I'll want them to say or approve if it's the best decision for everyone in the school. Some of these males were less qualified than me. This thing happened for some time until one of the males I used to consult took advantage of that and used it against me. It was then I decided to fly over that."*

The submission above clearly illustrates women's perceptions of masculinity as a source of power. The words fear and failure repeatedly came up in their submissions, revealing how societal norms spill over into the professional realm. Women feel the need to seek male endorsement to validate their decisions, even when their decisions are valid and relevant (Feldt, 2012). One participant emphasised that for women to succeed as leaders, they must be empowered with confidence from an early age and be able to make decisions for themselves. Otherwise, they will continue to decline leadership positions that are meant for them. Participant FP2 reiterated the importance of empowerment.

> FP2: *"I did not want to be a HOD and not to be a school principal. I did not want the burden that comes with the position. When given a few months to act, I had enough of it. I wasn't ready for the stress of being a HOD or a principal in my life. In a nutshell, I did not believe in myself. I felt I'd mess up. I did not want to be harassed by these learners, especially adolescent boys. So, I decided to quit to another school which is where I am now."*

The concepts outlined in the preceding account indicate that women believe that leadership comes with stress that they feel unprepared to handle. They tend to prefer men to hold positions of power, often due to an inferiority complex that acts as a barrier to their pursuit of leadership positions. Eustace (2018) asserts that some women find it difficult to make decisions independently regarding their own progress and are occasionally even "pushed" into leadership roles. It is worth questioning how someone can be pushed into a higher position in order to effectively lead.

On the other hand, women who display courage and confidence are often unfairly labelled as arrogant, harsh, and heartless. As a result, they often feel discouraged from pursuing leadership positions due to threats and backlash from various stakeholders and society as a whole. One participant from focus group 7 (FDG 7) shared the following insight:

> FDG 7: *"Men occupying leadership positions in high schools are viewed as perfect leaders because they are perceived as confident, but confident women are perceived as arrogant and unfeminine."*

This account highlights the fact that projecting self-confidence can carry different meanings for men and women. The value attributed to this trait changes depending on the gender of the individual. Furthermore, self-assured males in leadership roles are accepted by society because they are believed to possess strong leadership qualities. Conversely, women who exhibit confidence are often seen as lacking femininity and being overly aggressive. Due to this bias, women are compelled to adopt more masculine leadership styles, which draws criticism from both male and female subordinates (Rayyan, 2017). The participants also observed that confident women have a lower likelihood of being promoted to senior leadership positions.

The findings of this study, based on the accounts of six participants, revealed that many of them harboured personal resentment, resulting in diminished aspirations of becoming school principals. The participants commonly cited a lack of confidence as one of the factors contributing to women's underrepresentation in educational leadership positions. It is evident that when it comes to leadership and management, women often experience impostor syndrome, as defined by Shepherd (2017) as an intense and persistent fear that one's success is undeserved. This finding aligns with Mberia's (2017) research, which concluded that women lack self-confidence and assertiveness, leading them to shy away from aspiring to leadership positions and ultimately contributing to their underrepresentation.

Theme 2: Family attachment

In this study, one of the major challenges faced by the participants in managing their school was the struggle to balance work responsibilities and family duties. Female participants acknowledged that they were unwilling to distance themselves from their families. FP3's opinion on these matters is quoted below.

> FP3: *I had it in mind that one day I'll be a principal. I tried to apply for that position, and when it was time to make a serious follow-up, I remembered that there was no one taking care of my children. I found it important for me to be home with my children. We, as women, are caregivers of our families. It's on our nerves to care for them. I think those women who desert their homes and chase leadership positions too soon miss out a lot. When are they going to build the bond between themselves and their children? Their children will start behaving badly while they are developing their careers. One day, they will feel guilty for not being there 100%.*

The sentiment shared above shows that female teachers often delay applying for school leadership roles because of family obligations. Six participants confirmed that their responsibilities in caring for children and their husbands have caused them to postpone advancement to leadership positions. It was important for them to consider the pros and cons, but their involvement in their children's and husbands' lives took precedence and was a primary reason for delaying promotion to leadership. Their lives are complex, as they often struggle to be good mothers while competing with men who are more likely to be free from parenting roles. According to researchers like Kellerman and Rhode (2017), women are leaving leadership positions to prioritise their families, which disrupts their professional careers.

This balancing act is challenging, as female educational leaders need to find a balance between their careers and being responsible wives. Another principal (who is still single but can sense the pressure) commented:

> FPG 12: "*Although I am not married but thinking only, I still feel challenged about work and family tasks coming together.*"

FP3 was promoted to the position of principal. However, due to the school's two campuses, she was later transferred to the faraway campus, which was approximately 100 km away from her home. She mentioned:

> FP3: *"I did not want to be a principal. I did not apply for this position for a very long time. After applying, I got the position. A lot came to my mind thinking about my family. I asked myself how I was going to manage my family when I was too far. I also wanted my husband near me… I decided to turn down the appointment and went back to my former campus to work as a deputy head."*

In this study, many women had their reasons for not choosing leadership roles and were content in lower-ranked jobs. Living in a culture where women are expected to primarily be homemakers, some women found satisfaction in holding low-ranking jobs and taking care of their families rather than pursuing leadership positions.

These female leaders felt that dedicating a significant amount of time to leadership roles would come at the expense of their own well-being and that of their families. Most of the women in the study expressed a responsibility to care for their families, particularly their children, and therefore did not wish to pursue higher leadership positions to avoid additional responsibilities. As a result, their advancement opportunities were impacted despite their expertise and capabilities to become leaders.

According to the findings, out of the 12 participants, 7 preferred to work in closer proximity to their families. This suggests that these participants prioritised being close to their families, overtaking jobs that would require them to be far away. These findings align with those of Mekonnen (2017), who conducted a study on the challenges and support faced by women in Indonesia aspiring to become senior academic administrators. The research revealed that women's limited involvement in higher education administration was influenced by the pressure to balance family and career obligations.

5.2 Organisational factors

When analysing the data, it was found that the lack of women in leadership positions in high schools can be attributed to organisational factors. These factors include sexual harassment and recruitment processes.

Theme 1: Sexual harassment and corruption

Sexual harassment continues to be a prevalent and widespread injustice perpetrated by men. It was evident in the majority of interactions with participants and was reported to be normalised. This is another factor that instils fear in professional women who aspire to leadership roles. Undoubtedly, it contributes to the underrepresentation of women in educational leadership. FP4 provided their comments on this matter, stating:

> FP4: *"Sometimes, as a woman, you have to sacrifice a lot of things like your integrity by using your "bottom power" to gain promotion. I was once demanded sex by one of the members serving in the higher-decisions board in favour of being promoted to principalship positions. I was also promised to have my child given a scholarship. I refused that because of my religious background. He then started ill-treating me until I asked for a transfer to another school".*

From the caption above, it is evident that female instructors aspiring to become head teachers must first consider the difficulties they may face in dealing with selection board members. These board members, who are mostly male, abuse their power by pressuring women for sexual favors in exchange for leadership promotions. According to research, female teachers who reject these advances often face abuse and hostility in return. These findings support the argument made by

Douglas and Leite (2017) that women in leadership positions are sometimes subjected to verbal or physical sexual harassment, which discourages them from pursuing such roles.

> FGP10: *"I was promised to be transferred to a better school in the city, but I refused. If you refuse their sexual advances, they make sure you suffer a lot. You become their worst enemy."*

This finding from the FGD10 reinforces the long-held belief that female heads always experience sexual advances by their bosses as a form of blackmail and are promised transfers to urban schools as potential principals. Those fortunate women who engage in sexual corruption with their unethical bosses get posted near or in urban schools. Those who refuse to engage in such acts are more likely to be posted in rural schools without reliable resources.

This finding aligns with the claims made by Brescoll et al. (2018) that sexual harassment contributes to gender prejudice and inequality in the educational sector. This factor is discussed in relation to the Radical feminism theory that forms the foundation of this study. Radical feminism highlights the mistreatment of women, children, and vulnerable individuals by men. It calls for an end to sexual harassment against women, recognising their rights as full human beings rather than objects for men's use. Throughout history, women have faced sexual harassment by men in positions of power. This is consistent with the findings of Douglas and Leite (2017), which suggest that women sometimes experience verbal or physical sexual harassment, discouraging them from pursuing leadership positions.

Theme 2: Recruitment process

The primary reason for the lack of female representation in principal positions in high schools has been attributed to unfair appointment practices. Out of the twelve participants, eight mentioned the allegedly biased hiring practices of the Teaching Service Commission's recruiting panellists, which they believed played a role in the underrepresentation of women as high school principals. Many participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the system, stating that the path to becoming a headteacher (FP2) is more intricate and challenging than commonly perceived.

> FP2: *"Something needs to be done to stop corruption when it comes to promoting teachers. There is a lot of nepotism and corruption going on there because we do apply as women but are not selected."*

Three of the four participants, during face-to-face interviews, bemoaned that the selection process for being appointed to be a high school principal is biased against women. FP1 lamented by saying:

> FP1: *"The Teaching Service Commission Board in Eswatini is dominated by men who always sit there during interviews to demean women through the questions they ask during interviews. For these reasons, they discriminate against females. There is a lot of favouritism going on with the selection board. Men are mostly selected for the vacant posts."*

The citation above acknowledges that the processes during shortlisting and interviews were not transparent enough. FGP5 concurred with the submission made by FP1 when she said that men on the selection board want things to be done their way. They have less interest in women becoming top personnel and support other men in getting these senior positions, even if the male is less qualified.

> FGP5: *"A man less qualified than me was selected to be a principal. Males in the selection board prefer other male principals in schools to avoid talking too much and feel they can reason much better with another man."*

The above analysis highlights a serious concern about the fairness of the interview processes. It indicates that there is a perception of bias within the board when it comes to selecting and appointing

men to leadership positions over women. All participants strongly believe that the system is biased against female educators. There is a prevailing belief that women are considered unfit for leadership roles and are not seen as effective leaders. Even when women meet the required qualifications, they often face the challenge of not being selected for leadership positions. This "Qualifications do not matter" syndrome is prevalent in our schools. In environments where male leadership is dominant, female principals encounter numerous obstacles. They have to deal with the perceptions of gender stereotypes held by male community leaders and are often expected to work much harder in order to succeed as leaders (White, 2018).

During face-to-face interviews, three out of the four participants expressed frustration with the biased selection process for high school principals, particularly regarding women. FP1 lamented by stating:

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The above citation highlights an issue with recruitment procedures in the selection of heads of schools. It is evident that sometimes the recruitment board does not follow these procedures, leading to discrimination against women during the selection process. In contrast, men are frequently chosen for leadership positions based on interviews conducted in a fair manner, following the recommended procedure.

Oplatka and Hertz-Lazarowitz (2006) state that the liberal feminist philosophy recognises the unequal rights women face and advocates for equal opportunities. Hartmann (2015) also emphasises the importance of freedom and fair opportunity for all individuals within the liberal feminist ideology. However, the study's findings demonstrate a misalignment between these theories and actual appointment practices. These theories primarily focus on women who lack access to basic human rights, are not free, and are not recognised by society as having the necessary qualifications for important positions.

The study's findings reveal favouritism in the appointment of school heads. Male candidates secure senior positions through personal relationships and their gender, even if they lack the required qualifications. This form of corruption exists within the Teaching Service Commission. The findings further support existing literature that demonstrates how women are consistently subjected to selection criteria predominantly created by men (Gandhi & Sen, 2020).

6. Conclusion

It can be inferred that women were perceived as less competent leaders because they had low self-esteem and lacked confidence in themselves to challenge demanding leadership positions in education. The participants admitted to having low self-esteem, an inferiority complex, and a lack of confidence. Other females were reportedly discouraged from pursuing additional education, stating it was a waste of time since they thought they would never be promoted if the status quo was maintained. Society expects females to perform domestic chores and raise children. The way females are socialised, they are associated with menial and subservient tasks. It was concluded that women appear to begin pursuing leadership roles later in life because they have children to raise and husbands to take care of, which delays their advancement into leadership positions. The conclusion drawn was that the panellists at the time of the interviews treated female educators unfairly. Their perceptions of the selection of candidates for principal posts were negatively impacted by these encounters. They perceived the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles as oppressive, leading them to accept whatever happened to them in life. It was concluded that in exchange for promotion to senior leadership positions, male school heads and those in the education selection

board expect sex from female employees they supervise. Females who refuse to accept these sexual advances are not recommended for leadership posts and become victimised or ill-treated despite being qualified. This practice diminishes the interest in women to pursue leadership and widens the female underrepresentation gap in senior leadership positions.

7. Recommendation

Lack of confidence: It is evident that women are hesitant to accept top leadership positions in high schools due to their lack of confidence and reliance on men for approval in decision-making. Women should be encouraged to educate themselves and develop the ability to distance themselves from stereotypical behaviour on a personal level. Society needs to adopt a more optimistic perspective and begin to value female leadership. With this change, women may receive support, encouragement, guidance, and appreciation, which can inspire them to take on leadership roles. In order for women to understand that leadership is for both genders, the Ministry of Education in Eswatini must provide them with meaningful leadership training that enhances their capacities.

Family attachment: Conclusions have been reached that women lack the motivation to advance in leadership roles, despite possessing the necessary skills, because they are highly committed to their families and submissive to their husbands. The Eswatini government should educate female educators on the importance of developing leadership abilities. Regional officials should establish professional networks and mentorship programs. In order for these initiatives to have an impact on reducing inequality and supporting women in educational leadership positions, they need to be implemented and regularly monitored. Adjusting the mindset may be seen by men as a directive to significantly change their cultural way of life. Concurrent activities aimed at changing men's attitudes towards viewing women as inferior to them can greatly enhance women's motivation to rise to leadership positions.

Sexual harassment and corruption: It has been determined that some female teachers who desire to become head teachers are targeted by male members of the selection panel and school administrators due to their positions of authority. They often promise them career advancements in exchange for sexual favours, and if the women decline, they are mistreated and not recommended for leadership positions despite their qualifications. It is advised that Eswatini implement enforceable laws and policies at all levels of government to support occupational safety and empower women and girls (Dlamini et al., 2019). Currently, Eswatini's offenders are subject to the rules and regulations set forth by the Teaching Service Commission (TSC). Government-level offenders should be addressed through statutory laws that allow for legal punishment. Regulations should also be enacted to make it illegal for women to accept sexual bribes from offenders.

Recruitment processes: The Ministry of Education and Training should develop a gender policy for hiring high school principals. Clear gender policies and legislation should be in place to ensure equal opportunities for both females and males. A new appointment law is recommended, which would require that, in order to achieve gender parity if a school has a male principal, the deputy head teacher must be a female, or vice versa. Women who possess abilities, qualifications, and experience comparable to men should be given equal opportunities, not just when there are vacancies to fill.

7. Declarations

Author Contributions: Conceptualization (Y.D.K & D.M.); Literature review (Y.D.K.); methodology (Y.D.K & D.M); software (N/A); validation (Y.D.K & R.G.M); formal analysis (D.M.); investigation (Y.D.K.); data curation (Y.D.K & D.M.); drafting and preparation (Y.D.K & D.M.); review and editing (Y.D.K & D.M .); supervision (P.K.); project administration (Y.D.K & D.M.); funding acquisition (U.N.I.Z.U.L.U.). All authors have read and approved the published version of the article.

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