Research Article

ERRCDF
Rethinking Education 4 Inclusive Development

Voices from the Forefront: Socio-Cultural Factors Hindering Women's Representation in Principalship Positions in South Africa

Ntsika Dyantyi[1*] iD

Lulama Lynette Mbatha[2] iD

AFFILIATIONS

[1]Faculty of Education, Walter Sisulu University, Mthatha, South Africa.
[2]School of Education, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa.

CORRESPONDENCE

Email: ntdyantyi@wsu.ac.za*

Abstract: The underrepresentation of women in principalship roles within the education sector constitutes a persistent global challenge, significantly influenced by socio-cultural factors. This case study investigates stakeholder perceptions of these barriers in two secondary schools located in South Africa's Eastern Cape. Employing a qualitative research design within an interpretive paradigm, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with nine selected participants. Analysis revealed key themes pertaining to the systemic challenges that women encounter in progressing to leadership positions. The study identified several critical factors that impede women's advancement, including entrenched societal stereotypes and cultural beliefs that perpetuate discrimination in leadership selection. Cultural and societal norms further complicate the landscape for aspiring female leaders. The findings indicate a pressing need for initiatives aimed at cultivating a supportive environment for women in educational leadership. Recommendations include the implementation of leadership awareness workshops to educate stakeholders about the value of gender diversity and to address unconscious biases in promotion practices. Moreover, community empowerment campaigns are essential for engaging local support for women in leadership. Enhancing access to professional development opportunities for women can equip them with the requisite skills for leadership roles. Ultimately, the study advocates for schools to ensure equal opportunities based on talent and merit rather than gender, thereby fostering an equitable framework for advancement in educational leadership.

Keywords: Educational leadership, socio-cultural factors, women's representation, principalship.

1. Introduction

The representation of women in educational leadership roles has long been a significant concern, resulting in a pronounced gender imbalance within the field. Despite women comprising a substantial portion of the public education workforce, their underrepresentation in principal positions, particularly in secondary schools within the Oliver Reginald (O.R.) Tambo Inland Education district, underscores the persistent challenge of gender inequality (Jauhar & Lau, 2018). Current statistics from the O.R. Tambo Inland district in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, indicate a considerable gender disparity, with only 24% of secondary school principals being women and 76% being men (DBE, 2024). The principalship in this district is still perceived as a male domain, notwithstanding several policies aimed at promoting gender equality and transforming school leadership. This paper examines the socio-cultural factors that impede women's representation in principal positions at two secondary schools in the Eastern Cape. Msweli and Kule (2023) define socio-cultural factors as the extensive array of societal norms, traditions, and cultural values that shape individuals' perceptions and interactions with female leaders. These factors significantly influence leadership opportunities for women, particularly within patriarchal societies.

According to Mbithuka (2019), socio-cultural elements directly shape individuals' thoughts, emotions, values, and behaviours, thereby affecting the perception and treatment of women in leadership roles. Within the context of the two Eastern Cape secondary schools under investigation, these influences are particularly salient. Zivave et al. (2020) assert that gender biases rooted in cultural traditions frequently obstruct the acceptance of women in leadership roles, as male dominance is often regarded as the normative standard. This cultural disposition affects the attitudes of both men and women, consequently limiting the leadership opportunities available to aspiring female educators. Similarly, Dyantyi (2025) contends that deeply embedded socio-cultural norms that privilege men in leadership perpetuate stereotypes depicting women as less competent leaders. These perceptions are sustained not only by male counterparts but also by the broader school community, which includes parents, teachers, and learners. Consequently, female leaders in these schools must continuously navigate layers of discrimination and prejudice that undermine their authority and competence. Despite these challenges, many women who pursue leadership roles in education demonstrate remarkable resilience. However, their advancement is often constrained by the very norms that shape societal attitudes toward female leadership.

Moorosi et al. (2020) assert that women pursuing educational leadership in South Africa encounter obstacles stemming from traditional stereotypes that define leadership as inherently masculine. This notion further perpetuates gender disparities and marginalises women in leadership roles. Consequently, this perception has inadvertently led to the exclusion of women from such positions, as their qualities and leadership styles frequently do not align with conventional expectations (Avgeri, 2015). Women in educational leadership face significant challenges that impede their advancement to senior positions, despite initiatives aimed at achieving gender equity. Mathevula (2014) identifies traditional gender roles and stereotypes as key barriers limiting women's access to leadership opportunities. Building on this foundation, Moorosi et al. (2020) assert that, although some societal progress has been achieved, the organisational cultures within educational institutions often remain resistant to change, perpetuating male-dominated environments that marginalise women's contributions. Mutanga (2022) further notes that while stereotypes are evolving to become more subtle, they continue to undermine women's leadership potential and representation.

Dudu (2019) emphasises the pervasive nature of patriarchal structures in educational institutions that favour men and inhibit women's ascendance to leadership roles. Collectively, these studies underscore the necessity of systemic change to address entrenched power imbalances and foster a more inclusive leadership landscape. Bruey et al. (2018) highlights the cultural obstacles that disproportionately affect women, especially those from minority backgrounds, in attaining leadership positions. Their research indicates that entrenched cultural norms often perpetuate the belief that women are ill-suited for leadership, particularly in societies with deep-rooted patriarchal traditions. This underscores the necessity for targeted interventions that tackle both societal and institutional barriers to foster diversity and gender equality in educational leadership. Overall, these studies reveal the ongoing complexities surrounding women's underrepresentation in this field, emphasising that despite some societal advances, traditional gender roles and power dynamics remain significant impediments.

Gender stereotyping represents a significant barrier that adversely affects women in the workplace, as highlighted by Ndebele (2018) and Vassakis et al. (2018). These scholars argue that societal expectations and biases frequently assign specific roles and capabilities based on gender, thereby limiting women's opportunities and diminishing their motivation to pursue leadership positions. For instance, women are often perceived primarily as caregivers, a perception that appears incompatible with the demands associated with educational leadership roles. Such deeply ingrained stereotypes not only hinder women's professional growth but also influence how their leadership capabilities are perceived by both men and women within the educational sector. Dyantyi (2025) asserts that these stereotypes perpetuate outdated notions that align leadership qualities with masculine traits such as

assertiveness, decisiveness, and competitiveness, while undervaluing traditionally feminine traits like empathy, collaboration, and inclusiveness. Consequently, women may face implicit biases and overt discrimination when seeking leadership roles, as their qualifications and competencies are frequently scrutinised through a gendered lens.

Similarly, the insights from Xiang et al. (2017) regarding Australia and New Zealand underscore the detrimental impact of gender stereotypes on women's career progression in the education sector. Women aspiring to high-level decision-making roles often find themselves underestimated or overlooked, further entrenching the cycle of exclusion from leadership opportunities. The authors contend that stereotypes limit women's visibility for leadership positions and perpetuate the notion that they lack the requisite qualities for roles that demand vision and innovation. This observation aligns with Carli and Eagly's (2016) findings in the United States, which reveal that despite notable progress toward gender equality, female leaders continue to encounter systemic barriers rooted in deeply ingrained gender stereotypes. Their assertion that these challenges are not confined to specific countries emphasises the global nature of the issue, suggesting that the struggle for gender equity in leadership transcends national boundaries.

Stereotypes significantly impede women's leadership potential by situating them disadvantageously on account of their gender (Mthembu, 2013). According to Moorosi (2010), the entrenched cultural norms within society and educational institutions in South Africa exacerbate the challenges faced by women in their pursuit of upward mobility within the social hierarchy. These stereotypes contribute to constrained definitions of leadership that are predominantly aligned with traditional masculine attributes, such as assertiveness and decisiveness, while simultaneously diminishing the value of qualities typically associated with femininity, such as empathy and collaboration. Consequently, women encounter systemic obstacles in attaining leadership positions and are subjected to biases in hiring, promotion, and various decision-making processes.

Hightower (2019) asserts that cultural practices in South Africa frequently inform men's preferences for male candidates in leadership and managerial roles. He emphasises that stereotyping represents a cultural practice rooted in deeply entrenched gender biases that favour men over women in leadership contexts. These cultural norms and societal expectations that prioritise male leadership perpetuate systemic inequalities, effectively marginalising women from opportunities for advancement and decision-making power. This discourse underscores how cultural practices reinforce gender norms that not only restrict women's access to leadership roles but also shape societal perceptions of leadership as inherently masculine, thereby sustaining gender disparities within South African organisational environments. Hightower (2019) contends that cultural practices in South Africa significantly influence men's preferences for male candidates in leadership and managerial positions. He highlights that stereotyping reflects a cultural practice deeply rooted in entrenched gender biases that favour men over women in leadership contexts. Dyantyi (2025) asserts that these cultural norms and societal expectations that prioritise male leadership perpetuate systemic inequalities, effectively marginalising women and limiting their opportunities for advancement and decision-making power. This discourse emphasises how cultural practices reinforce gender norms that not only restrict women's access to leadership roles but also shape societal perceptions of leadership as inherently masculine, thereby sustaining gender disparities within South African organisational settings.

Ngcongo and Ramraj (2022) elucidate the prevailing notion in traditional African culture that characterises a "good" woman as one who is responsible for cooking, laundering for her husband, and attending to domestic chores related to the family. Traditional African societies frequently uphold gender roles that ascribe to women the primary responsibility for domestic tasks, including cooking, cleaning, and caring for the family. These expectations are deeply rooted in cultural norms, customs, and values that shape gender roles within the community. The emphasis on domestic

responsibilities can severely limit women's opportunities for education, employment outside the home, and participation in decision-making processes. Such gender roles can constrain their autonomy and ability to pursue personal aspirations beyond the confines of traditional cultural expectations (Dyantyi, 2025). These studies underscore how deeply ingrained societal expectations and cultural norms can hinder women's progress in the workplace.

Swain (2019) addresses a significant issue in England, where female educators are frequently perceived as lacking essential leadership qualities such as authority and decisiveness due to the entrenched belief that leadership is a masculine domain. This historical precedent not only perpetuates the stereotype that men are inherently more suited for leadership positions but also undermines the contributions and capabilities of women. The characterisation of leadership traits as predominantly masculine reinforces a narrow definition of effective leadership, thereby effectively sidelining women who do not conform to these established expectations. This cultural bias establishes a significant barrier, as it diminishes women's chances of being recognised and promoted to leadership roles, fostering an environment in which their skills and potential remain undervalued.

The case of China, as analysed by Xiang et al. (2017) and Zivave et al. (2020), presents a complex interplay of historical and contemporary socio-cultural factors contributing to gender imbalance in leadership. Despite economic progress, traditional values that prioritise male dominance continue to shape gender dynamics, placing immense pressure on women to fulfil conventional domestic roles. This cultural expectation often conflicts with women's professional aspirations, creating a dual burden that further marginalises them in the workforce. Moreover, the competitive and hierarchical nature of Chinese corporate culture exacerbates the challenges women face in attaining leadership positions. Understanding these unique cultural contexts is essential for developing effective strategies to promote gender equality in leadership. It necessitates a nuanced approach that acknowledges both the historical legacies and contemporary realities that influence women's experiences in leadership across different societies.

In Nigeria, traditional gender roles and socio-cultural expectations significantly hinder women's leadership opportunities. Studies by Dudu (2019) and Mbalilak and Onyango (2022) provide insights into the impact of cultural norms on women's professional advancement. In many Nigerian communities, women are primarily viewed as caregivers and homemakers, a perception often regarded as incompatible with leadership positions. This viewpoint is reinforced by educational and professional systems that favour men, leading to a significant gender gap in leadership roles. Addressing these socio-cultural barriers requires a multifaceted approach that includes changing societal attitudes, providing support structures for women, and implementing policies that promote gender equality. Kenya faces similar challenges, were socio-cultural norms and patriarchal systems limit women's leadership opportunities. Research highlights how these barriers manifest in educational and professional settings. In Kenya, women often encounter systemic discrimination and bias in both recruitment and promotion processes (Sperandio & Kagoda, 2010; Allen, 2018). Traditional beliefs that prioritise male leadership and decision-making authority further exacerbate these issues. Additionally, the lack of mentorship and networking opportunities for women restricts their career advancement.

Sperandio and Kagoda (2010) assert that in Uganda, throughout their lives, women are rarely perceived as independent, strong-willed, or capable of making decisions for themselves. This lack of decision-making power is deeply ingrained in societal norms and perceptions. The authors contend thatsons are often favoured due to the belief that they carry on the family name and lineage, while daughters are regarded as destined for marriage, resulting in diminished appreciation and praise (Sperandio & Kagoda, 2010). These beliefs exemplify a robust patriarchal sentiment, wherein women are expected to be subservient to their fathers and subsequently to their husbands after marriage, thereby reinforcing the notion of male dominance. This perspective is corroborated by Ndimbo

(2018), who investigated how the criteria for appointing women to leadership roles in Tanzanian primary schools impact their opportunities. The study revealed that societal factors constrain women's access to leadership positions, including unfavourable attitudes and traditional beliefs. Accordingly, societal factors perpetuate a cycle in which women encounter systemic barriers rooted in outdated perceptions of gender roles, limiting their capacity to achieve leadership roles and contribute fully to educational leadership and governance.

Similarly, South Africa presents a scenario where historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors converge to influence women's leadership opportunities. Moorosi et al. (2020) and Mathevula (2014) illustrate how the legacy of apartheid and post-colonial power structures continues to affect gender dynamics in school governance and broader professional contexts. These studies highlight that, despite progressive policies aimed at promoting gender equality, deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and racial inequalities persist, posing significant barriers for women aspiring to leadership roles. For instance, women frequently encounter double discrimination based on both gender and race, limiting their access to leadership positions and professional development opportunities. Black women, in particular, face discrimination associated with their gender identity, further exacerbating their marginalised societal status (Moorosi et al., 2020). Understanding these local challenges is crucial for designing targeted interventions that address the specific socio-cultural barriers confronting women in South Africa.

In the context of this study, the unique socio-cultural and economic challenges that influence women's leadership opportunities in the Eastern Cape region of South Africa reveal that, despite the existence of legislative frameworks promoting gender equality, such as the EmploymentEquity Act (1998), women in the Eastern Cape encounter persistent barriers rooted in traditional patriarchal norms and economic inequalities (Lumby & Azaola, 2014; Msweli & Kule, 2023). These barriers manifest in various forms, including limited access to professional development, mentorship, and leadership training, which are essential for career advancement. Furthermore, the legacy of apartheid and ongoing racial inequalities exacerbate these challenges, particularly for black women, who experience dual discrimination based on both gender and race (Lumby & Azaola, 2014; Msweli & Kule, 2023). The decentralisation of school governance to School Governing Bodies (SGBs) has also been critiqued for perpetuating male dominance in decision-making processes, often sidelining qualified female candidates (Moorosi et al., 2020). Consequently, targeted interventions addressing these specific local challenges are imperative for creating a more inclusive and equitable environment for female leaders in the Eastern Cape. The aforementioned scholars confirm that, while commonalities exist in the barriers women face globally, significant differences are also shaped by local cultural contexts.

In certain cultures, patriarchal traditions may be more deeply entrenched (Moorosi et al., 2020; Mathevula, 2014; Sperandio & Kagoda, 2010), resulting in formidable barriers to women's leadership. Conversely, in more democratic societies, implicit biases and glass ceiling effects persist, although explicit discrimination may be less pronounced. By comparing these differences and similarities, one can attain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of gender leadership issues and tailor interventions to specific cultural contexts. Despite the existence of policies such as the Commission for Gender Equality Act (1996a), the South African Schools Act (1996c), the Education Labour Relations Act (1997), and the Employment Equity Act (1998b), which uphold principles of equality and non-discrimination while emphasising the need for equitable representation of women in leadership roles, a gap appears to exist between policy and practice. This disparity raises pertinent questions regarding the factors influencing the marginalisation of women educators in principalship roles. This study aims to investigate stakeholder perceptions of socio-cultural factors, as addressing these factors is crucial to bridging the gap between policy and practice, thereby ensuring equitable representation of women in leadership positions.

1.1 Study objective

This paper was guided by the following objective:

- To explore socio-cultural factors hindering women's representation in principalship positions in South Africa

2. Theoretical Framework

The study utilised liberal feminism as its theoretical foundation. Unlike some other feminist theories, liberal feminism does not have a single founder. It emerged during the late 18th and early 19th centuries as part of the first wave of feminism. Proponents of this movement championed women's rights, advocating for equal educational opportunities, legal rights, and suffrage. Liberal feminist ideas have remained influential and have been further developed by subsequent feminist scholars. Liberal feminists advocate for equal opportunities and strive to improve conditions for women, particularly in the workplace (Pavlidis, Kennelly, & Castro, 2020). This involves addressing and rectifying disparities that women face in the workplace, such as unequal pay, limited advancement opportunities, and discriminatory practices. They advocate for policies and practices that promote fairness and equality, ensuring that women can access the same career opportunities, benefits, and working conditions as their male counterparts. Their goal is to eliminate barriers to education that contribute to inequalities, thereby enabling women to reach their full potential (Pavlidis et al., 2020). Additionally, they challenge gender stereotypes and discrimination, advocating for equal opportunities for all genders (Bruey et al., 2018).

Liberal feminists also work to dismantle gender stereotypes and discrimination. Gender stereotypes are preconceived notions regarding how individuals should behave based on their sex, often leading to unfair treatment and limitations on personal and professional opportunities. For instance, stereotypes may suggest that women are less competent in leadership roles or that men are less nurturing. According to liberal feminists, equal access to education and leadership positions in educational institutions should be available to all genders (Pavlidis et al., 2020). This study is grounded in liberal feminist theory, which emphasises the significance of women who are denied basic human rights and are often perceived as incapable of holding leadership positions. This theoretical framework is appropriate for the research as it encourages female educators to recognise themselves as competent and effective managers qualified to become principals, particularly in secondary schools. Furthermore, it is particularly relevant because, historically, female educators have been excluded from senior principal roles in secondary schools due to prevailing gender biases.

3. Methodology

This paper utilised a qualitative approach, specifically employing interviews to collect data. The qualitative method was selected to delve into participants' knowledge, thoughts, experiences, and observations (Welman & Wilston, 2020). Interviews are essential in qualitative research as they offer deep insights into participants' experiences, meanings, and perspectives (Denhardt & Draai, 2015). By implementing qualitative methods and conducting interviews, the researcher gathered comprehensive information from individuals with particular characteristics. This approach enabled the researcher to document the experiences of key informants who shared personal insights, perceptions, and observations regarding the challenges faced by women in secondary school leadership.

The study comprised six participants chosen through purposive sampling, which included two principals, one departmental head, two circuit managers, and one post-level one educator. Purposive sampling is defined by Creswell (2011) as a non-random selection method where participants are chosen based on their expertise and relevant experience with the subject matter. In this context, purposive sampling allowed the researcher to selectively identify participants who met the specific

criteria and objectives of the study, aiming to attain informative results (Maree & Pietersen, 2015; Merriam, 2009). The biographical information of the participants is represented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Biographical Information of participants

Participants	Gender	Age	Name of School	Qualifications	Years of teaching experience	Participants Current Positions
PN1	Male	52	S1	Secondary Teacher Diploma (STD), Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE)	26	Principal
PN2	Female	47	S2	Bachelor of Education (B Ed) Bachelor of Education Honours (B Ed Hons)	18	Principal
DH1	Female	35	S1	Bachelor of Education (B.Ed)	10	DepartmentalHead
PL1	Female	38	S1	National Diploma: Adult Basic Education and Training (ND: ABET) Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)	11	Post level 1 Educator
CM1	Female	52	District Office	Secondary Teacher Diploma (STD), Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE), Bachelor of Education Honours (B Ed Hons), Master of Education (M Ed)	28	Circuit Manager
CM2	Male	55	District Office	Bachelor of Arts (BA), Bachelor ofArts Honours (BAHons)	25	Circuit Manager

Table 1 presents the biographical information of the study participants, detailing their gender, age, educational institution or workplace, academic qualifications, years of teaching experience, and current positions. The participants comprise school-based staff (including principals, a departmental head, and a post-level 1 educator) as well as district-level officials (circuit managers). That is, the table illustrates that the participants are experienced education professionals with diverse qualifications and leadership roles within the education system. All ethical guidelines were adhered to throughout the study. Participants consented to take part voluntarily and were made aware of their right to withdraw at any point without facing any consequences. Their privacy was safeguarded during the research process.

Data collection was carried out using semi-structured interviews, conducted in both IsiXhosa and English to accommodate all participants. Creswell (2013) notes that semi-structured interviews are designed to outline the topics to be discussed, facilitate the conversation to ensure thorough coverage, and include targeted questions. This structure enabled the researcher to investigate the phenomenon from various viewpoints. A guide containing key topics and questions was utilised throughout the interviews. Semi-structured interviews are typically employed to gain an in-depth understanding of responses and to examine topics in greater detail (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

To ensure precision and validation, audio recorders were used during the data collection process. The use of audio recordings provides several advantages: they help maintain the authenticity of data, reduce transcription errors, capture subtleties such as emotion and tone, and preserve context. Participants were interviewed with the assistance of tape recorders to ensure accuracy. Thematic analysis was employed to evaluate the experiences of female principals in secondary school leadership across five secondary schools in the Eastern Cape. Thematic analysis is an effective qualitative method for examining written transcripts of interviews and exploring a range of topics, from personal experiences to broader social issues (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). This process involves identifying recurring themes within the data and categorising them distinctly (Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016). The six steps of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) were carefully followed, including familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and developing the analysis. Each of these steps was diligently followed to ensure accurate interpretation of the data. This methodology aimed to provide a thorough understanding of the experiences and challenges encountered by female principals in secondary school leadership in the Eastern Cape, employing a case study method to highlight individual stories and shared themes. The following table presents the biographical information of the participants.

4. Discussion of Findings

5.1 Deep-rooted societal stereotypes

The study revealed a pervasive and entrenched influence of societal norms and perceptions that contribute to the underrepresentation of women in principalship positions. Participants consistently highlighted deeply ingrained gender stereotypes and beliefs within the communities, perpetuating the notion that men are inherently better suited for leadership roles than women.

> *People (people in our communities) have the mentality that females cannot lead them; they prefer to be led by males. It will take time to change because they are influenced by our society. It becomes a problem when female educators discipline learners. They (female educators) are not taken seriously; they are not respected just because they are females. (PN2)*

The finding above reveals that female educators are not taken seriously and not respected solely because of their gender, which reflects the persistent gender biases and stereotypes in society. This issue encompasses various layers of societal attitudes and systemic challenges that contribute to the unequal treatment of women in the field of education. This bias is further exemplified by the firsthand experiences shared by individuals below:

> *Let me say there is still a stereotype that the people who are supposed to be in labour leadership are those who are male. I once applied for a post as a chief education specialist, which is normally called Curriculum Education Specialist (CES), and then I was told by the community members, including the SGB, that the post was for a male; no female can lead in such a position. So, there are still those stereotypes within our communities, even though I may say that if I can take it politically, we voted in 1994, and affirmative action is in place, but it is not being implemented. (CM1)*

> *One other example to show that this issue of cultural issues is deeply entrenched in our locations or communities. You know when they're having their meeting there, females will stay alone, then on their side and then all males will stay on that side. On the other side. If you go there, as I say, this thing is deeply entrenched in their way of doing things. Only males would lead. They would only talk on just by themselves. Women are just quiet down there, but they cannot take the lead. So, if we can start with that and make them understand each other, make females free to talk and make males understand that women must be allowed to talk their minds, maybe that also can assist. As I say that it is*

> *deeply entrenched, even in religion, they're using the scriptures like 1 Timothy 2:11-12 that females must be silent, they cannot do this and that in terms of leading the congregation now. Even in our traditional settings, they will say, 'Asinakuva ngamfazi apha' (we cannot be told by a woman here). (PN1).*

The statements above clarify that the societal stereotypes of separating females and males during meetings reflect a traditional gender division that reinforces gender stereotypes. This segregation suggests that there are distinct roles and expectations for each gender within the community. The fact that only males lead and dominate discussions while females are expected to remain quiet highlights the unequal power dynamics and lack of gender equality within the community. This reflects a patriarchal system where men hold authority and decision-making power. Such a situation also places women at a disadvantage, as they encounter numerous obstacles preventing them from fully and effectively participating in the labour market. As a result, many women find themselves relegated to informal employment opportunities. These findings align with those of Sperandio and Kagoda (2010) in other contexts. They reported that, in Uganda, women throughout their lives are rarely seen as independent, strong-willed, or capable of making decisions for themselves. This perception of a lack of decision-making power is deeply ingrained in societal norms, culture, and attitudes. This notion was later supported by Ndimbo (2018), who examined how the criteria for appointing women to leadership roles in Tanzanian primary schools impacted their opportunities.

The study revealed that societal factors, including unfavourable attitudes and traditional beliefs, act as constraints on women's access to leadership positions. Sons are often favoured because they are believed to carry on the family name and lineage. In contrast, daughters are seen as destined for marriage, leading to less appreciation and praise (ibid). These beliefs reflect a strong patriarchal viewpoint, where girls are expected to be subservient to their fathers and later to their husbands after marriage. This reinforces the idea of male dominance. The South African context is no exception; some female educators experience a sense of hopelessness, leading them to accept submissiveness within the patriarchal system due to the prevailing cultural norms (Bruey et al., 2018). The findings of this study highlight how entrenched societal stereotypes undermine the authority and credibility of women educators in leadership roles. The persistent belief that leadership is inherently male reinforces barriers that prevent women from accessing principalship positions.

5.2 Socio-cultural beliefs and practices

Cultural beliefs and practices heavily influence the selection and recognition of leaders within secondary schools. The preference for certain individuals based on cultural or social contributions rather than qualifications exemplifies the challenges that women educators face in breaking through societal norms to attain leadership positions, as highlighted by the three participants below:

> *Socio-cultural factors have contributed to the underrepresentation of women educators in principalship positions in my school in a way that women are seen as people who are meant to be led by men. All important decisions are made by men, and women educators are meant to just obey without questioning anything. If women happen to question those decisions, they are seen as people who do not respect men and who do not have morals, as our societies instil the idea of women with morals as women who do not question decisions taken by men. (DH2)*

> *I think a factor that is influencing these imbalances or this underrepresentation of women educators in principalship positions is cultural differences. In our African culture, it is believed that men are supposed to be leaders. It affected many females who did not get these positions. (PL2)*

> *In South Africa, there are cultural practices that prevent most women from going to school. Such practices that were happening in the past have delayed most women to transform, mentally and otherwise, in terms of cash, in terms of geographical location,*

> *being far away from the institutions of learning and, as a result of poverty, making fewer privileged to the largest extent women to perforate the system and get into the higher levels of learning, where they would be mentally liberated and play successfully in the roles that men have played. (CM2)*

The three quotes from participants above illustrate how socio-cultural factors contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. Women face resistance, discrimination, and scepticism, not only from their male counterparts but also from entrenched societal attitudes that question the legitimacy of women's authority and leadership abilities. In South Africa, historical cultural practices have significantly hindered women's access to education, thereby delaying their mental and economic development. These practices, often rooted in gender discrimination, have resulted in women being geographically isolated from educational institutions and impoverished, further limiting their opportunities. The lack of educational access has prevented many women from achieving the mental liberation necessary to compete for roles traditionally dominated by men.

Nyondo (2023) states that certain social and cultural norms pose obstacles to women's potential to reach leadership positions. The impact of patriarchy has resulted in the marginalised status of women in many societies where these cultural values persist, potentially affecting the distribution of leadership roles between men and women in education today. Living in predominantly male-dominated societies, individuals are raised within a cultural framework that upholds male superiority. This influences decision-making processes for both men and women, as their choices are shaped by patriarchal values. For example, many women develop low self-esteem and lack confidence, leading them to rely on men for important decision-making tasks. These findings contrast with those of Hideg and Shen (2019), who conducted a study in Karatu District, Tanzania, focused on why there are still so few women in leadership positions in Tanzania. The findings reported that, technically, women are underrepresented in managerial positions of their own choice.

The socio-cultural beliefs and practices that undermine women's leadership potential are deeply embedded within historical and cultural contexts. The testimonies of participants underscore how these entrenched attitudes continue to influence the selection process, resulting in the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles. The persistence of these cultural norms necessitates a comprehensive approach to dismantling the barriers they create. Understanding the historical context and ongoing socio-cultural dynamics is essential for developing effective strategies to promote gender equity in educational leadership. By addressing these deeply ingrained beliefs and practices, stakeholders can strive to create an environment that values and supports women's leadership potential, ensuring that qualifications and abilities take precedence over cultural biases. This approach is vital for fostering an inclusive and equitable educational leadership landscape in the Eastern Cape and beyond.

5. Social and Managerial Implications of the Study

The paper reveals that entrenched societal stereotypes and socio-cultural beliefs and practices significantly contribute to the underrepresentation of women in principalship positions within South African secondary schools, particularly in the Eastern Cape. Gender stereotypes prevalent in communities perpetuate the notion that leadership is inherently masculine, resulting in a lack of respect for female educators and resistance to their authority. These perceptions are reinforced by cultural norms, religious interpretations, and traditional practices that marginalise women in both public and private spheres, including educational leadership. Furthermore, socio-cultural norms that dictate women's submissiveness and discourage them from challenging male authority, coupled with historical inequalities in access to education, have constrained women's career progression. Women are frequently evaluated based on cultural expectations rather than professional qualifications. The persistent influence of patriarchy not only hinders women's aspirations for

leadership but also diminishes their confidence and sense of agency, thereby creating a cycle of exclusion from key leadership roles in education.

From a social perspective, the findings expose how deeply ingrained patriarchal values continue to suppress women's voices and leadership potential in educational settings. These societal norms dissuade women from aspiring to or being accepted in leadership roles, reinforcing a culture wherein female leadership is perceived as abnormal or inappropriate. This perpetuates systemic gender inequality and diminishes the visibility of role models for younger generations of girls, thereby undermining broader efforts to promote gender equity in both education and society at large. If these cultural barriers remain unaddressed, there is a risk of normalising the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles and diminishing the overall inclusiveness of communities. From a managerial standpoint, the findings suggest an urgent need for a fundamental shift in how leadership roles are defined, filled, and supported within the education system. Recruitment, promotion, and evaluation processes are often swayed by informal, culture-driven biases rather than merit or competence. This necessitates the implementation of policies that advocate for gender-sensitive leadership development, active mentorship for women, and inclusive decision-making practices at both school and district levels. Without such interventions, educational institutions risk perpetuating discriminatory systems that limit diversity in leadership, ultimately negatively impacting school performance, staff morale, and the overall equity of the education sector.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

To effectively advance gender diversity in leadership, it is imperative to implement targeted strategies that address both organisational and societal barriers. Conducting leadership awareness workshops represents a crucial initial step in shifting mindsets among key stakeholders. These workshops should not only elucidate the tangible benefits of gender-diverse leadership, such as enhanced decision-making, innovation, and organisational performance, but also equip participants with tools to recognise and address unconscious biases that often impede women's career progression. Integrating these sessions into organisational culture can facilitate more equitable promotion practices and cultivate a leadership pipeline that prioritises competence over conformity to traditional gender norms. Concurrently, broader societal change is essential to maintain progress. Community empowerment campaigns play a pivotal role in reshaping perceptions surrounding women in leadership by engaging local leaders, families, and institutions to support women's ambitions and achievements. These campaigns should encompass storytelling, media advocacy, and educational initiatives that challenge stereotypes and encourage inclusive attitudes. Furthermore, increasing access to professional development opportunities, such as mentorship programmes, leadership training, and networking platforms, can assist women in developing the skills, confidence, and social capital necessary to excel in leadership roles. Collectively, these strategies establish a supportive ecosystem that not only promotes gender equity but also ensures long-term, sustainable transformation across sectors.

6.1 Directions for future studies

Future research should explore intervention strategies and policy implementation frameworks aimed at dismantling entrenched gender stereotypes and socio-cultural barriers within educational leadership. Longitudinal and comparative studies could examine the impact of gender equity training, community engagement initiatives, and mentorship programmes on shifting societal attitudes toward women in leadership over time. Additionally, research should delve into the lived experiences of both aspiring and current female principals across diverse regions and school types (urban vs. rural) to understand the variability of cultural influence and resistance. Finally, studies assessing the role of men as allies in promoting gender equity in educational leadership can provide critical insights into fostering inclusive and sustainable change.

7. Declarations

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

Data availability: The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Access will be granted to researchers who meet the data-sharing criteria established by the institutional review board or ethics committee.

References

Allen, A. (2018). *The power of feminist theory*. Routledge.

Avgeri, E. (2015). *The gender-influence perspective in educational management and leadership: A comparative study of upper secondary women principals in Thessaloniki, Greece and Stockholm, Sweden* [Master's thesis, Stockholms Universitet].

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Bruey, V. F., Berkes, A., Porter, E., Fritz, J. M., Owen, M., Barr, C., Bewicke, A. E., Onyido, O., Bennett, A., Del Re, E. C., & Hadjipavlou, M. (2018). *Gender, conflict, peace, and UNSC Resolution 1325*. Lexington Books.

Carli, L. L., & Eagly, A. H. (2016). Women face a labyrinth: An examination of metaphors for women leaders. *Gender in Management: An International Journal, 31*(8), 514–527. https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-02-2015-0007

Castleberry, A., & Nolen, A. (2018). Thematic analysis of qualitative research data: Is it as easy as it sounds? *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning, 10*(6), 807-815. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cptl.2018.03.019

Cresswell, J. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage Publications.

Cresswell, J. E. (2011). A meta-analysis of experiments testing the effects of a neonicotinoid insecticide (imidacloprid) on honey bees. Ecotoxicology, *20*(1), 149-157. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10646-010-0530-2

Denhardt, T., & Draai. (2015). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483392142

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2011). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. Sage Publications. DOI: 10.1177/1468794108098034

Dudu, A. (2019). *A whole school approach in implementing inclusive education in one province in Zimbabwe: A case study* [Doctoral dissertation, North-West University, South Africa].

Dyantyi, N. (2025). Crossing the bridge to leadership: A South African experience of female principals to secondary school leadership. *Journal of Culture and Values in* Education, *8*(1), 224-239. https://doi.org/10.46303/jcve.2025.14

Hightower, C. D. (2019). *Exploring the role of gender and race in salary negotiations* [Master's thesis, Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College].

Hooks, B. (2000). *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics*. Pluto Press.

In *Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on Digital Strategies for Organisational Success*. http://rfa%20j/nuwe%20web/edu-lead/papers/Dr%20George.pptx

Jauhar, J., & Lau, V. (2018). The 'glass ceiling' and women's career advancement to top management: The moderating effect of social support. *Global Business & Management* Research, *10*(1). Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College.

Lumby, J., & Azaola, C. (2011). Women principals in small schools in South Africa. *Australian Journal of Education, 55*(1), 73–85. https://doi.org/10.1177/000494411105500108

Maree, J. G., & Pietersen, J. (2015). Adaptation and implementation of the Rothwell-Miller Interest Blank. *Suid-Afrikaanse Tydskrif vir Natuurwetenskap en Tegnologie, 34*(1), 7. https://doi.org/10.4102/satnt.v34i1.1298

Mathevula, N. S. (2014). *Promotion of female educators into management positions at schools in Lulekani Circuit in the Mopani District, Limpopo Province, South Africa* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Limpopo, Turfloop Campus].

Mbalilaki, C., & Onyango, D. O. (2022). Factors contributing to female teachers' underrepresentation in schools' leadership: A case of Sumbawanga, Tanzania. *East African Journal of Education and Social Sciences, 3*(2), 120-129. https://doi.org/10.46606/eajess2022v03i02.0166

Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. John Wiley & Sons Inc.

Moorosi, P. (2010). South African female principals' career paths: Understanding the gender gap in secondary school management. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 38*(5), 547–562. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1741143210373741

Moorosi, P., Bantwini, B., Molale, I., & Diko, N. (2020). School governance and social justice in South Africa: A review of research from 1996 to 2016. *Education as Change, 24*(1), 1–23. *https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/7994*

Msweli, P., & Kule, X. E. (2023). Voices of women in boards count, effective participation counts more: A board gender diversity theoretical framework. *Ovidius University Annals, Economic Sciences Series, 23*(1), 162-170.

Mthembu, P. E. (2013). *Phenomenological study of the lived experiences of women primary school principals in Umgungundlovu District* [Doctoral dissertation].

Mutanga, O. (2022). Perceptions and experiences of teachers in Zimbabwe on inclusive education and teacher training: The value of Unhu/Ubuntu philosophy. *International Journal of Inclusive Education,* 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2022.2048102

Mythili, N. (2017). *Representation of women in school leadership positions in India* (Occasional Papers). National University of Educational Planning and Administration.

Ndebele, C. (2018). Gender and school leadership: Breaking the glass ceiling in South Africa. *Géneros*, 7(2), 1582–1605. http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/generos.2018.3179

Ndimbo, A. S. (2018). *The influence of criteria for the appointment of women in leadership positions in Tanzanian primary schools: A case of Ikungi District* [Doctoral dissertation, Mzumbe University].

Ngcongo, L., & Ramraj, A. B. (2022). Analysis of challenges and opportunities faced by youth entrepreneurs during COVID-19 in South Africa. In *Sustainability and the future of work and entrepreneurship for the underserved* (pp. 213-231). IGI Global.

Pavlidis, A., Kennelly, M., & Castro, L. R. (2020). White women smiling? Media representations of women at the 2018 Commonwealth Games. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 37(1), 36–46. https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2018-0144

Qadir, M. (2019, January 6). The challenges of women's leadership and management in India. In *Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on Digital Strategies for Organisational Success* (pp. 1275–1281). http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3323814

Riger, S. T. E. P. H. A. N. I. E., & Sigurvinsdottir, R. A. N. N. V. E. I. G. (2016). Thematic analysis. In *Handbook of methodological approaches to community-based research: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods* (pp. 33-41).

Sperandio, J., & Merab Kagoda, A. (2010). Women teachers' aspirations to school leadership in Uganda. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 24(1), 22–33. https://doi.org/10.1108/09513541011013024

Swain, P. (2019). The lived experiences of US female employees who encountered gender-based wage disparity [Doctoral dissertation, Capella University].

Vassakis, K., Sakka, G., & Lemonakis, C. (2018). Demystification of the glass ceiling phenomenon: Gender stereotyping and successful managers' personality traits in Greece. *EuroMed Journal of Business*, *13*(1), 2–19. https://doi.org/10.1108/EMJB-06-2017-0023

Welman, M., & Wilston, L. (2020). Research methods and techniques. *Journal of Public Administration*, 76(4), 12-30.

Xiang, X., Ingram, J., & Cangemi, J. (2017). Barriers contributing to the under-representation of women in high-level decision-making roles across selected countries. *Organisation Development Journal*, 35(3), 1-16.

Zivave, W., Shoko, A. B., & Mazuruse, M. (2020). An exploration of gender representation in Zimbabwe's updated 'O' level Family and Religious Studies syllabus. *Journal of New Vision in Educational Research*, 1(2), 304–320.