




Exploring teachers' experiences on the women's representation in the school's governance at secondary schools in the Thabo Mofutsanyane district, South Africa

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Abstract – This study investigates teachers' experiences regarding the representation of women in school governance within the Thabo Mofutsanyane district of Free State, South Africa. It employed a qualitative research approach and a case study design, employing semi-structured interviews for data collection. Participants were purposefully selected from four secondary schools in the district. The data were analysed using a thematic analysis model. The findings indicate that female teachers encounter significant challenges in governance roles at secondary schools, despite comprising the majority among their colleagues. This study recommends that female teachers be afforded the same opportunities as their male counterparts to assume administrative roles within school governance, provided they meet all the necessary qualifications. Specifically, the analysis reveals that, despite their numerical dominance, female teachers remain disadvantaged compared to male teachers when attaining principal positions.

Keywords: Underrepresentation, Governance of the School's and Gender Parity

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I. INTRODUCTION

It is essential to recognise the need to enhance women's representation in leadership roles across various organisations, locally and globally.

While advancements have been made, studies indicate that women's status in society has not significantly improved in recent years (Ely et al., 2011). In South African school management, the issue of gender parity is increasingly pressing. Although female teachers comprise a significant majority in the education sector, statistics reveal that their male counterparts dominate management positions. This disparity is concerning, especially as we progress into the 21st century. Despite existing laws promoting fairness and equality aimed at achieving gender parity, we still see a greater number of female teachers, student teachers, and degree holders compared to their male peers. Many of these women hold advanced and contemporary degrees, indicating a strong potential for leadership roles. As Chibvembe et al. (2023) pointed out, enhancing women's representation in school governance is a critical issue that warrants attention nationwide. Fostering gender parity in leadership could empower women and enrich the educational landscape.

Despite the various legal provisions and initiatives designed to enhance the involvement of women in leadership roles within educational settings, several challenges continue to pose obstacles. Socio-cultural stereotypes, personal circumstances, and issues such as corruption can impede the representation of female teachers in leadership positions (Mbalilaki & Onyango, 2022). Moreover, Uwizeyimana et al. (2014) highlight that women often remain underrepresented in school executive roles due to a lack of encouragement or inspiration to seek top management positions, as they may feel comfortable in their current roles.

Additionally, there is an observed issue regarding confidence among female educators. While it is well-established that women have the

competencies required for leadership positions, many may have reservations about their capabilities, leading them to perceive themselves as less qualified than their male colleagues, who are often more assertive in pursuing such opportunities. It is essential to recognise the significant contributions of female teachers to the South African education system, as they play a crucial role in achieving positive educational outcomes.

In addition, the National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES) (2015) has statistically shown that most teachers in the education sector are women. However, it remains true that most school administrators throughout South Africa are still predominantly male. Uwizeyimana et al. (2014) further explored this topic, noting that the percentage of women earning professional degrees in governance education has increased by 25%. Nevertheless, they argued that "gender imbalances in leadership positions persist across all South African schools and worldwide" despite the growing presence of women in education.

The Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2012) reported that the Republic of South Africa had 418,109 educators, a significant statistic. Among these educators, 285,252 are female, representing 68% of the workforce, while approximately 132,852 are male, making up 32%. This data indicates a predominance of female educators within the DBE (DBE, 2012). However, Mbepera (2015) reported that it is noteworthy that, despite women comprising over 70% of the teaching workforce, only about 30% of leadership roles in schools are held by females, as pointed out. Addressing this disparity presents an opportunity to enhance gender representation in school management and leadership across South Africa.

In South Africa, the educational landscape reflects a notable gender disparity in leadership roles. While the representation of women in educational leadership has more than doubled over the past decade, as highlighted by Grogan and Shakeshaft (2010), it is still significantly lower than that of their male counterparts, especially at advanced levels of education. The National Framework of Teacher Development shows

that while 53% of South African teachers are female, men dominate management positions and opportunities for advancement. This suggests a pressing need to address social inequalities within the system. Eagly et al. (2007, p. 193) point out that societal pressures and prevalent industrialised cultures often prioritise skills and competence over gender equality in hiring and retention practices. Moving forward, there is a vital opportunity to create a more equitable educational leadership environment that fosters the growth of female instructors and enriches the overall educational experience for all.

Nindie (2022) asserted that the principle applies equally to both men and women, as an individual's character should not be assessed solely based on gender. However, when women are allowed to assume leadership roles, especially as school principals, they often face discouraging assumptions regarding their leadership abilities. This stems from the belief that women's explanations for their qualifications are rooted in their fundamental character, alongside the ingrained stereotype that portrays women as weaker individuals who struggle with decision-making. Bureaucratic culture continues to disadvantage women, particularly in educational decision-making (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). The low representation of women in both structural and functional roles, at both strategic and operational levels, underscores this issue (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024).

This perspective highlights the unique challenges female school leaders encounter in South Africa as they work to navigate the complexities of diverse educational environments. Despite facing public scrutiny and a lack of peer support, female principals demonstrate resilience and determination. This study on female school leadership aims to explore and illuminate the multifaceted challenges these leaders overcome, ultimately contributing to a greater understanding of their valuable contributions to education.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Challenges of female teachers and causes of the underrepresentation of female principals in the schools

The underrepresentation of women in leadership roles has attracted significant attention from researchers in South Africa. Dlanjwa (2018, p.24) highlights that while female teachers constitute approximately 68 percent of the teaching workforce, only 36% of school principals are women. This disparity indicates potential barriers that need to be addressed for women to advance to senior management positions. According to Hideg and Shen (2019), socialisation dynamics often position women as more vulnerable, inhibiting their progression into leadership roles. Recognising and addressing these challenges is essential for fostering a more equitable representation of women in school leadership positions.

According to Mastracci (2017), the representation of women in government has been historically low, particularly since the period following independence in 1961. While some women have been able to secure leadership positions, their overall participation remains limited. Mastracci (2017) highlighted a persistent imbalance between men and women that appears to be systemic rather than coincidental. Mastracci (2017) suggested that the post-colonial government had an opportunity to promote gender equity by prioritising women's access to higher education in universities and colleges. However, challenges in employability persist, raising essential questions about the alignment of qualifications with gender balance in leadership roles. Addressing these issues could pave the way for increased female representation and influence in governance.

Additionally, these problems cut across cultures and continents and are not restricted to a particular sector or aspect of the socioeconomic structure of society (Uwizeyimana et al., 2014). The difficulty that women may have juggling their concurrent roles as housewives, mothers, and school administrators is one of the issues that should be considered and may contribute to the problem at hand, according to Uwizeyimana and Mathevu (2018), who concur with the earlier authors. Once more, the issue of motivation was considered because,

according to the data, most women are competent and meet the requirements for these positions. Still, they are simply too lazy or afraid to apply for senior executive positions.

Uwizeyimana and Mathevu (2018, p. 86) highlight that female educators often seek support from others to understand their strengths and potential. They suggest that women may face additional challenges in recognising their capabilities compared to their male counterparts. This can lead to self-doubt, particularly regarding their moral decision-making. Societal norms have historically positioned men in more dominant roles, influencing perceptions of capability. Despite women representing a significant majority in the education sector, there is an opportunity for empowerment and growth. We can pave the way for female educators to thrive and redefine their professional roles by fostering an environment that encourages self-assurance and collaboration. According to Uwizeyimana and Mathevu (2018), women often struggle to take on leadership roles due to a lack of support and criticism from their male colleagues. The challenge lies not in their abilities or skills but in deeply rooted social norms and expectations that shape our perceptions. Women are frequently seen as emotional and irrational, which undermines their candidacy for leadership positions. Consequently, they find themselves caught in a vicious cycle, feeling powerless to advocate for themselves, further marginalising their voices. To break this cycle, we must cultivate an inclusive environment where everyone feels valued and heard. This requires actively supporting and mentoring women, confronting our biases, and working to dismantle them. Only then can we hope to achieve true gender equality across all facets of society.

Female aspirants' perceptions of chances of emerging to senior executive positions in educational institutions

It is essential to recognise that various factors, including the choice of educational institution, cultural background, and personal biases, can shape perceptions of female teachers and affect their opportunities for advancing to senior executive roles in schools. Even though strides have been made toward gender equality and empowering women, noticeable disparities persist in numerous fields and professions. These issues must be considered when examining the representation of women in top leadership positions (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Gender discrimination can hinder female teachers from climbing the corporate ladder to senior executive positions (Toropova et al., 2021). Research indicates that women often face career obstacles, being perceived positively as nurturing, sensitive, and effective educators. While these traits highlight their dedication to students' well-being and academic success, they can also lead to the stereotype that women are better suited for specific roles, such as elementary school teachers, rather than leadership positions. Tabassum and Nayak (2021) further emphasise that work-life balance issues, particularly the uneven distribution of caregiving responsibilities, may impede women's performance at work. The demands of senior executive roles, which often require significant time and flexibility, can pose challenges for those with family commitments.

Chibveme et al. (2015) emphasised that perceptions and barriers to achieving gender parity in leadership roles vary across educational systems, regions, and personal experiences. Many institutions and organisations are actively working to support women's career advancement and professional growth. It is widely recognised that offering women equal opportunities for leadership roles, mentorship, and skill development can significantly enhance their prospects for reaching senior positions. To foster gender parity, creating environments that value and nurture women's leadership capabilities is essential. In contrast, Malveaux (2017) highlighted the importance of implementing laws that promote equal opportunities, fair assessment practices, and transparent hiring and promotion processes to help women advance into senior executive roles.

Strategies for addressing the issue of the underrepresentation of female principals

It is crucial to acknowledge that certain strategies could effectively

address this issue. For instance, ambitious female principals might greatly benefit from exposure to seasoned executives who can offer guidance, support, and networking opportunities through mentorship programmes. Women aspiring to leadership roles may also gain valuable skills from training and professional development initiatives. These programmes have the potential to contribute to closing the gender wage gap and creating a robust pool of qualified female candidates for top positions (Cohen & Kiran, 2020). Conversely, there is a strong belief that creating networking opportunities and support systems for female educators can significantly enhance knowledge sharing, collaboration, and professional growth. Imagine vibrant professional organisations, dynamic women's leadership networks, and lively online discussion boards working together to connect female educators. These spaces allow them to share their experiences, access valuable resources, and learn from one another. By fostering such connections, we can empower capable female educators to confidently step into leadership roles, including principals and other significant positions. Their talents and skills truly shine in these environments, transcending any gender biases and ensuring that their abilities are recognised and celebrated.

According to Lambert et al. (2012), it is essential to put in place policies and procedures that foster fair assessment and selection processes. Additionally, removing decision-makers who harbour biases is crucial for addressing gender representation issues effectively. This approach should include establishing diverse selection panels, using standardised interview questions, and applying objective assessment criteria. Nguni et al. (2006) emphasised the importance of creating an inclusive workplace that nurtures and supports women's leadership aspirations, cultivating a welcoming educational environment that values gender equity and diversity. He argues that professional development programmes, awareness initiatives, and promoting a collaborative and respectful culture can significantly contribute to achieving these goals.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2019) highlighted the importance of establishing mechanisms to monitor and track women's participation in leadership roles within schools and educational institutions. This involves regularly collecting and reviewing data on gender representation to identify areas for improvement. Such efforts promote accountability and help assess the effectiveness of interventions over time. Tailoring these strategies to specific contexts and supporting them with continuous research, evaluation, and collaboration among educational institutions, policymakers, and relevant stakeholders is essential.

III. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The study explores the teachers' experiences of women's underrepresentation in the school's governance at the secondary schools in the Thabo Mofutsanyane district, Free State, South Africa.

IV. METHODS

Research approach

This study adopted a qualitative approach. A qualitative research approach allows participants to participate in research (Wattis et al., 2018). Similarly, this approach is subjective rather than objective, and the results must be expressed in writing rather than through numerical or statistical analysis. Its primary goal is to address the "why's" and "how's" of the research or investigation. This research approach suited this study as it explores the experiences of female teachers advancing to senior executive positions in school administration.

Research paradigm

This study used a transformative paradigm. This paradigm entails a social construction produced by the knower's particular experiences, personality attributes, and social connections. This worldview is maintained based on the understanding that there are numerous injustices and inequalities and that research and analysis are essential

problem-solving skills. Mertens (2010) describes it as a paradigm that considers the complexity of language, power imbalance, and cultural norms to facilitate social transformation. Again, it seeks to expose what has been disguised by a social movement that advances liberation and emancipation (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Moreover, the transformative paradigm seeks to comprehensively explore the basic aspects of social injustice and unfairness, including gender, race, religion, socioeconomic class, and sexual orientation. In this study, the researcher also considered how female teachers and their counterparts can empower one another through various initiatives, such as women empowerment campaigns and leadership workshops that the Department of Education commonly facilitates. The paradigm's acceptance was also based on the researcher's ability to thoroughly understand the participant's life experiences, their influence on society, and learners' academic performance at school. With indications regarding the deployment of this paradigm to the aims and objectives of the study, considering that issues of gender imbalance emanate from societies, cultural beliefs, and norms, must be considered to generate solutions for the issue at hand adequately and constructively.

Research design

The study employed a case study design to address the research questions. It embraces a constructivist epistemology, recognising that societal and patriarchal issues significantly influence social factors, such as gender. According to Shah (2019), constructivism emphasises how individuals create meaning from their own experiences of the world. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the underrepresentation of women in school governance in the Thabo Mofutsanyane district.

Participants

Through purposive sampling, six female principals were selected from four secondary schools in the Thabo Mofutsanyane district of the Free State Province, South Africa. These participants were chosen based on their specific characteristics, knowledge, and suitability for the study. Preferably, the target of my participants should be well-experienced female principals because the researcher strongly believes that their responses would be an accurate reflection and give an insight into all the issues mentioned above.

Data collection techniques

This study used semi-structured interviews to gather information on their experiences, which is most commonly employed in qualitative research (Goodman & Evans, 2006). If they consented to recording their responses, this study also used the necessary tools to record them. This interview form allows participants to express themselves without having their views restricted by the researcher's point of view or previous research findings. This assists in being in a better position to consider the participants' opinions, values, and beliefs during the session. As a result, this could assist the tempo of the interview and benefit the researcher in terms of insightful and good responses that could be provided by the participants after the consideration of this phase. Interviews may also be biased, considering the interviewers may sometimes influence the participant's responses. Interviewers may be costly in the sense that, for researchers to obtain accurate and correct responses, they may require some training and purchase some recording devices that record and transcribe the entire interview as it is without omitting even a single word (Legard et al., 2003).

Data analysis

This study employed thematic analysis to explore the experiences of female teachers regarding the underrepresentation of women in school governance. The objective is to identify patterns in individuals' behaviours and perspectives on this issue. Thematic analysis is a valuable tool for qualitative data analysis, involving examining data sets to identify, analyse, and report significant patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This qualitative approach is crucial, as it allows for a more flexible understanding of data and enables effective handling of large data sets by categorising them into key themes. There is also the potential for identifying sub-themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), researchers can utilise this

analytical method with various text collections, such as transcripts or interviews, to uncover recurring themes, concepts, or topics. This approach comprises seven steps: coding, familiarisation, creating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Ethical considerations

This section addresses the ethical issues pertinent to this study since protecting the subjects' well-being while collecting data is critical. The researcher should utilise ethical consideration as a research strategy to ensure that the rights and identities of the participants are protected. At the same time, the study is being done in each environment (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 338). Ethical clearance was filed for and obtained via the University of the Free State for the schools visited for data collection. Before data collection, participants were informed about the study's aims and procedures (King et al., 2018). Participants were given informed consent papers describing all aspects of the process before the trial. Participants were also informed that their involvement in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw without repercussions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Participants were informed about the data collection instruments and processes, and their anonymity was ensured. The data would be removed after the research and saved in a password-protected file. The written presentation was made available to the audience for review once more (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Using fictitious names to conceal the participants' identities safeguarded their privacy rights.

V. RESULTS

Demographic results

Four female principals selected from four secondary schools in the Thabo Mofutsanyane district participated in this study. Therefore, the pseudonyms mentioned below were used for the identified schools: School 1, School 2, School 3, and School 4, and the participants: Catherine, Mabina, Gladys, and Isaac. They mostly had a Bachelor of Education degree as the highest qualification.

Table 1: Demographic results

Schools	Pseudonyms	Age	Highest qualifications	Gender	Experiences in Teaching	Principal	Positions
1	Catherine	46	¹ BEd., ² Hons.	Female	16	5	Principal
2	Mabina	54	¹ BEd., ² Hons, Female	Male	25	9	Principal
3	Gladys	42	³ MEd.		17	7	Principal
4	Isaac	59	¹ B.Ed., ² Hons.	Male	30	16	Principal

¹BEd.: Bachelor of Education degree, ²Hons: Honours degree in Education, ³MEd: Masters degree in Education

Thematic results

Male teachers' counterparts, alongside some female teachers, oppose being governed by women

Lack of support and compliance

Some preconceptions about the quality of women's leadership become apparent when they are given the chance to take leadership roles, notably those of school administrators. When the study was carried out, it was evident that most participants highlighted the difficulties female principals encounter from their female counterparts and male teachers. It appears that most men are still not ready for the transition and the change in roles because of how they behave towards women, which leads them to look down upon them and fail to comply and execute their duties accordingly to sabotage and prove the point of their claim in terms of women being unfit and unable to maintain order and discipline.

On the other hand, the participants also revealed that some women normally hate the idea of accounting for another woman. Still, instead, they prefer male principals because they assume that they can command better and that it is within them to be captains of the ship. This clearly illustrated the lack of compliance as well as support for one another from the female teachers in general, which calls for concern because statistically, and this was, of course, a consensus for almost all my participants when they were asked this:

"From my perspective, which is informed by my experiences as both a

teacher in general and a principal, I would say some female teachers are still failing to understand that gender is just a matter of a sex organ because abilities dictate if the person is equal to the task or not. But from their perspective, they still feel that female principals are not worthy of occupying these posts because, in most cases, when you are challenged on duty as a female principal, it is commonly female teachers who look down upon you, and just a few male counterparts who also feel that they can do way better than you. As a result, you were challenged to show people that you did not just fall into that seat but earned it through proper appointment processes when you deal with such conduct in line with policies in place from the department" (Catherine).

"Realising that some still hold strong sentiments that female principals cannot lead them is hard and devastating. It is sad when women are at the forefront of leading those regimes because you would anticipate them to be supporting one another, but instead, it is vice versa. In my experiences as a teacher, I had a female principal who was looked down upon by many female counterparts simply because she was a woman, not because she was not equal to the task. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that there is a need for a serious intervention to address those behaviours and stigma" (Mabina).

It is a disturbing experience to be looked down upon based on your gender by your female counterparts, especially because, as Africans, I feel like it defeats the purpose of fighting for gender balance while we are still not supporting one another. I have also been a victim of many attacks from my female teachers on issues of ill-discipline and failure to accept the reality that, for one to be a principal, they do not necessarily have to be men, but instead, qualifications and abilities must be considered. There are a few instances where male counterparts also misbehave, but commonly, it is female teachers" (Gladys).

"To me, women still lack some proper training and some sense of humanity because some women only choose to act insane when they are dealing with their female counterparts as their principals. At the same time, they comply without any hesitation if the situation is vice versa. In my tenure as principal, I have never really been challenged by how I have attested female Principals being challenged, looked down upon, and ridiculed by their female Counterparts. Although there are instances where male teachers also look to prove that they can do way better than you as a principal, I still feel that female Principals are more challenged and provoked than male" (Isaac).

The sentiments shared by the participants exclusively narrow the issue at hand to each other's experiences, as all four participants have had almost common or similar experiences during their tenure as either teachers or principals of their respective schools. As a result, it is safe to agree that participants, as the principals of their respective schools, can play a pivotal role in addressing the issue. According to the "South African Schools Act," "Gender and sexual diversity education is mandated by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996 (RSA, 1996), the South African Schools Act, No. 84 of 1996 (DoE, 1996a), and the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (DBE, 2011b)."

Therefore, it is safe to challenge the principals to make recommendations to the department for more complex initiatives that mandate teachers to always act under the school's code of conduct and sensitise all teachers on the repercussions of failing to abide by the policies in place. As a result, there is no doubt that all female teachers were keen to be in a space if they knew that all policies to protect them were being enforced. In a nutshell, the aim is to ensure that the work environment is safe for both genders to assume all roles and responsibilities in the governance without fearing being made to feel inferior based on gender.

This perspective is consequently insufficient for female school leaders who strive hard to overcome the injustices and complexities of the many educational situations in South Africa. Because female school leaders frequently experience public criticism and denigration as well as a lack of support from their colleagues due to their gender, this study on female school leaders investigates the variety and complexity of issues they must face. The deep-seated notion that women are weak individuals with the toughest time making decisions stems from the problem that women's arguments for exhibiting brilliance and having a profession mostly depend on their basic character. In the world of education, bureaucratic culture still discriminates against women in

decision-making. According to Thelma and Ngulube (2024), the low percentage of women occupying structural and functional positions at the strategic and operational levels proves.

With all the recommended resolutions amended in line with the participants' submissions, there is no doubt that more women will get some motivation and inspiration to challenge themselves for the better. The principals of the schools, departmental heads, and School Governing Bodies (SGB) must continue to ensure the safety of both learners and teachers at schools because safety issues may affect the productivity of teachers and learners, let alone the mental health of all. Studies have shown that schools lacking discipline fail to produce outstanding results. Again, for the issue at hand, it is also safe to conclude that women's representation in the school's governance eventually finds expression if all the recommendations are considered.

Women are too soft and too occupied to handle this post, considering the house chores that still await them at home

Inferiority complex

The responses from the participants support Mnisi's (2015) assertion that men are still in charge, primarily because women are not filling the senior executive positions of the schools, because they struggle with inferiority complexes, even though most female teachers who dominate the education sector are equally capable and competent to do so. This theme aims to conceptualise issues that women face that hold them back from occupying these school's administrative positions, although they meet all requirements. Participants were, therefore, asked which issue emanates directly from the female aspirants failing to occupy the space (internal issues).

"Based on my encounters, I firmly say issues of lack of motivation, self-esteem, and self-discouragement from these teachers play a pivotal role because you find that in most cases, they rarely apply when these job posts are out because they assume that these positions are reserved for their male counterparts over them" (Catherine).

"Whenever I converse with female counterparts, I assume that most believe they do not have the abilities to occupy the space successfully. Some claim to be too committed to their chores from home, having to perform wife-duties, whereas others are busy trying to grow their families" (Mabina).

"How we normally get busy is scary; therefore, women often feel overwhelmed by the workload and the responsibility of managing their children and husbands. They argue that some women do not believe gender roles change, especially in today's times, and their low self-esteem contributes to their belief in being submissive to men" (Gladys).

The author suggests that some women may not believe that gender roles change and that their self-esteem is low, making it difficult for them to balance their roles and responsibilities.

"From the general observation I have been making for the past few years, yes, most women in space are competent, capable, and have what it takes to lead successfully, but instead, they are just fearful. Some of them, although some, grab these opportunities with both hands when they are presented. However, what still calls for concern is that most lack motivation and self-esteem. Henceforth, those who rise to the space are normally a minority compared to the vast majority within the space and meet all the requirements" (Isaac).

With that being said, the consensus of all participants indeed illustrates that there is an ongoing underrepresentation of women in a senior executive position in schools, concurring with Mnisi (2015), who maintains that, Despite the numerical dominance that female teachers have over male teachers who makes up a very minimal percentage of the threshold, but women remain underrepresented statistically when it comes to the occupation of the executive positions of the schools. When you consider the responses of all participants, you note that there is a common response in all their responses: lack of self-esteem or confidence, motive, and fear of challenges. Most female teachers prefer to remain at the mercy of their male counterparts, but they have what it takes to change the situation.

On the other hand, what also calls for concern is that these women have adequate qualifications to occupy the space but are not there as they are supposed to. Henceforth, something should be done about it

immediately to encourage more women to take up the space. Again, it should be noted that the issue of gender imbalance will not soon find expression anytime if the situation continues the way it is, because it appears as if most female teachers prefer to ditch their careers for their duties as wives. In addition, some female teachers lack inspiration because they think of responsibility as something they never manage to take. Henceforth, they prefer to remain in their comfort zones without being challenged or made to feel inferior by anyone. As a result, some teachers are keen on occupying the space, but the general understanding is that it becomes a challenge when they are supposed to act upon it. Although some are encouraged and motivated, I still maintain that much must be done to salvage the situation.

Other communities are still biased toward female principals

Societal norms

Higgs et al. (2023) indicated that society is an organised community sharing the same life and governed by beliefs, values, and aspirations for a common purpose." In this context, certain communities hold ideas that privilege men to the detriment of women. As a result, women are considered inferior to men and so subservient to them. In this regard, societal obstacles for women relate to persuading society to do the opposite.

The participants' responses illustrate that some societies are still rigid in their approach to female principals. After all, they are viewed as unfit and lacking the ability to maintain order, especially in rural schools where most of the students appear to be unruly, ungovernable, and very spiteful because they were either raised by single parents, for example, their grandmother, without proper support. This study has identified descending views on how societies respond to gender roles; hence, even our participants attest to their responses. Men have been socialised to be practical, competent, logical, and aggressive, whereas women have been socialised to be sensitive, warm, tactful, and expressive. Thus, Ntshongwana (2024) highlighted that eliminating gender role preconceptions is essential to advancing women in leadership roles inside educational institutions. This is essential to combat the stigmas that society members who do not understand how learners develop strive to propagate.

"Ehh... I would say it is still such a tricky and devastating matter because I also underwent a very severe traumatic experience with some members of the SGB, some of whom are also members of society in general. For countless times, I was called names and told how unfit I was to lead the school successfully. Some even compared me with male principals who had failed to lead the school successfully. It was saddening to know that some societies still perceive women as inferior to men" (Catherine).

"To be frank with your question, most women are still afraid to take a stand and own up to the spaces, especially in the schools from Kasi or Lokshen, because they are still afraid of the ill-treatment that either parent, school governing members, or students commonly impose. They still believe that male counterparts, instead of females, should hold senior executive positions up because they are always assumed to be strong, feared, and clever enough to hold these positions in comparison to women, who are perceived to be weak, fearful, and less competent in terms of executing their roles and responsibilities. As a point of reference, I also attested to such experiences, as I had to put my foot down against members of society and show them that I am a woman of steel who's dedicated and determined to transform the school and ensure that academic excellence is the top priority for all of my colleagues; therefore, that is how my respect was earned" (Gladys).

"First and foremost, I admit that societies and communities are unkind and very challenging when it comes to women in leadership because they still believe that women must be submissive to men at all materialistic times. With that being said, it has therefore come to my attention yet again that members of societies still need to be educated because how they treat principals in general, irrespective of gender, at times is way out of order and uncalled for and calls for serious intervention from the department, as well as collaboration from SGB members and all teachers, to ensure no teachers are scared to assume any executive positions in the governance of the schools. With all my experiences with other enthusiastic, capable, and competent women to occupy the space, they were commonly looked down upon. As a result, most female teachers are

still discouraged from rising to the anticipated level of governance, as they should" (Mabina).

On my encounters, I would say, yes, it is true that there is still a long way to go to successfully bridge the gap between male and female teachers in terms of the treatment they are subjected to by either the bureaucratic systems that might be informed by the norms and beliefs from the past that might be prevalent today. Most prominently, these issues are still being expressed because nobody is willing to take a stance against them. Women in South Africa's society are still degraded to the state of non-being as they are persistently subjected to severe ill-treatment just based on their gender. Extracted from my experiences of my teaching career, I would say that it has been very stressful for all women who were serving as executive members because when things did not go well, they would be the ones to feel the heat more than anyone else because their leadership was always questioned to the point that they even somehow lost the courage to avail themselves of these posts as executive members of the schools. That said, our communities still need to engage in self-introspection in how they treat urgent changes meant to bring about transformation" (Isaac).

"Considering the responses provided by the participants about the question asked, it is safe to conclude that societal norms are still a very impactful issue that has delayed the progress of many societies, especially considering the bias they impose on women in leadership. All participants have had experiences where women were made to feel inferior, either by other colleagues, members of society in general, SGB members, or the student population at large. That said, it is crucial for all stakeholders involved to play their part in emancipating societies from their minds. Numerous occurrences were influenced by the lack of cooperation and respect for teachers, particularly women, in the teaching and learning sector" (Isaac).

Furthermore, gender refers to the cultural roles men and women assign (De Vos, 2012). Thus, men and women may have different societal roles. Certain cultural stereotypes persist that women cannot control schools as effectively as men (Bowen, 2005). As a result, there is a call from various societies for the re-evaluation of this act to create a safe and free environment for all in the sense that, when job posts are applied for, teachers who qualify for promotions are those with good academic transcripts regardless of their gender; thus, women deserve to be treated with the same level of respect when they occupy those positions considering that processes are fair and firm for everyone.

"Therefore, one of the proposed amicable solutions in this regard is that there should be campaigns that should be initiated by SGB Members working together with the Department of Education to educate and also sensitise members of society, students, and teachers in general about the importance of taking gender away from the roles and responsibilities because that creates unnecessary expectations and also degrades the appointed principals simply because of their gender, whereas that does not happen if male principals are in charge. In addition, to allow more female teachers to take up the space, there is a serious call to action. There is also a need for alignment between the municipalities and societies in dealing with issues of this nature that emanate from communities because it affects the transformation process, as we all understand the cruciality of a teacher in society" (Catherine).

Urgent need for women empowerment workshops

Explore gender concepts in schools

Observing the participants' responses indicated that women lack self-esteem, motivation, and professional support, which encourages and equips them with the professional and necessary abilities to assume executive roles and responsibilities in schools. This comes after a clear inclusion that statistically, women dominate the education sector yet remain inferior to their male counterparts regarding the assumption of senior executive positions, asserts Mnisi (2015). As a result, when the participants were interviewed on this matter, this is what they had to say:

"I can say that most women lack some inspiration; self-esteem is very low for others because they do not even want to imagine themselves assuming these executive positions, because they assume they are strictly reserved for their male counterparts. They claim to be too busy for this hectic life of meeting after meeting, so you might even be required to sideline your family to balance your work" (Catherine).

"Based on my prior experiences and observations for the past few years, I can say we still have an issue of female teachers who are still looking down upon each other, disregarding one another, and always aiming to prove others to be incompetent compared to their male counterparts. Therefore, this also results in many women losing inspiration to take up these posts because of fear and a severe lack of confidence to challenge anyone they may encounter" (Mabina).

"Most women enjoy remaining in their comfort zones without being challenged or sweating. On the other hand, other women prefer to be submissive to men, whereas they have what it takes to govern themselves. And again, the vast majority lacks some sort of self-esteem, in the sense that, despite meeting the requirements, they are instead just prepared to take responsibility" (Gladys).

women's underrepresentation, what do you consider the biggest issue that female applicants may comprehend

It is quite strange how female teachers look down upon themselves. Considering that most women meet the academic requirement, they remain unequivocally unbothered about having to assume these responsibilities, as they assume that this type of work is strictly reserved for male teachers, in contrast to female teachers. The most bothersome issue here is that female teachers spend much time fighting and being jealous of each other instead of working together towards a common goal, and an outstanding issue is self-esteem.

"With that being said, based on the responses of all 4 participants, they share sentiments on this regard, as much as there are so many women who do meet these primary requirements to assume the roles and responsibilities of assuming these senior executive posts from schools, the main issue is that they do not believe in themselves to the point that some would prefer to remain submissive to men than to get these posts. On the other hand, some female teachers still perceive themselves as beings that must do whatever it takes not to go against men since they believe that those men are more advantageous as compared to them in terms of maintaining discipline and ensuring that everyone complies and abides by the rules" (Isaac).

According to Nyoni and Che (2019), the underrepresentation of women in prominent educational administration roles is due to a lack of empowerment and openness. On the contrary, this clearly illustrates and emphasises women's empowerment, especially because of self-esteem, lack of confidence, and motivation for female teachers to take the stand and fight for what is deservedly theirs. Moreover, in this regard, the motive is crystal clear in that schools, in collaboration with SGB and the Department of Education, must introduce empowerment campaigns that seek to equip female teachers with the necessary abilities and leadership techniques that challenge them to leave their comfort zones.

On the other hand, following the deep analysis of the responses provided by the participants, it was rather pivotal to engage in amicable solutions to the issue at hand to salvage the situation in the future. As a result, the notion of "gender concepts" was regarded as another solution following initiatives such as women's empowerment and consistent workshops. According to Ellemers (2018), gender concepts could be perceived as a way in which men and women are anticipated to behave, and the amount of value and respect vested in everyone by members of society. Participants were, therefore, allowed to make recommendations that were employed to address the issues of gender imbalance. Thereafter, all participants were allowed to hear their views on the issue of gender concepts. The questions asked were as follows:

According to your experiences and the deeper understanding of gender concepts, what should be done to assist women who lack the necessary self-esteem, self-confidence, and courage to rise through the ranks and challenge the school's senior executive? Und also equips them with the crucial education that pertains to the roles of gender in line with the gender concepts because it appears that they (female teachers) have thus reserved so much energy, power, and credit for their male counterparts instead of making the space and environment competitive, especially all those who entail the same level of qualifications just like everybody else. This is what the participants had to say:

"Based on the observations I have made, it is fair to introduce or initiate workshops that are aimed at equipping all female teachers with leadership

abilities and also to restore some faith, dignity, and moral values so that women refrain from being submissive to men, even when they are not supposed to" (Catherine).

"From my understanding, women are always smart, intelligent, and goal-driven, but in this regard, I feel like female teachers should engage in self-introspection to understand their shortfalls. Again, it appears that some lack the motive and dedication to act by their qualification, but instead, they want to allow everybody else to define who they are and what they stand for" (Gladys).

"What seems to be interpreted wrong by female teachers is gender roles. Truth be told, we are no longer in an era where women are just perceived as carriers of children, sensitive beings that must always submit to men, even when it is just unnecessary. Therefore, as part of the amicable solution, I wish to challenge female principals already in a space to lead by example towards initiating and facilitating these workshops to empower one another with all necessary abilities" (Mabina).

"To be precise, female counterparts find it difficult to understand that times have changed in the sense that males and females stand an equal chance to migrate to any space of senior leadership of any department. Henceforth, there is a serious and strategic call to the Department of Education and Teacher's unions to further advocate for workshops that emancipate and impact them with a broader understanding of gender concepts and roles as they still affect how most societies and teachers make their decisions to date" (Isaac).

Based on the analysis that was made of the responses of all participants, there is a clear indication that most female teachers, together with members of society, lack abilities and a broader understanding of gender concepts; hence, they still look down upon women in the space of leadership, particularly when they are entrusted with the responsibility of headmaster or rather the principalship of the school, as they commonly assume that only men teachers are worthy of being principals, departmental heads or to dominate the School Management Team (SMT) positions merely. That said, there is a clear direction regarding recommendations that participants have proposed, as they were allowed to do so.

As a result, there were propositions for facilitated workshops that the Department of Education must initiate, working with teachers' unions, current principals, and members of the society. On the other hand, there is also a suggestion of mentorship programmes that aim at grooming leaders to become the best of themselves, as we understand that leading people requires someone to possess various skills. We may mention conflict resolution skills, considering that some people may challenge you to the core to check if you are mentally and psychologically fit. Above all, leaders must pave the way in the sense that they should always walk the walk. When they aim to instil discipline, they should also be disciplined. Furthermore, being resilient under harsh conditions is also crucial, considering that dealing with different personalities may sometimes just mean nothing but a severe headache for one.

VI. DISCUSSION

The researcher considered the participants' responses to the challenges that female teachers face as they battle to emerge into the executive positions of the schools around Thabo Mofutsanyane. The general sentiment in this regard was extracted from the responses of all participants, as they concurred with each other on the issue of ill-behaviours and bad conduct emanating from their counterparts. It appears that most female teachers are battling to keep up with the attitude and, as well, the arrogance and ill-behaviours of their counterparts, who find it challenging to accept the reality that gender roles do change, especially in this era that we are in. As a matter of fact, in the general understanding of this issue, most female teachers challenged their counterparts on the basis that they find it very challenging to submit and report to principals or any officer of the same gender as they are in comparison to their male counterparts, who are usually given so much respect when they occupy those roles. On top of that, other male teachers also concurred with these women, as they challenged these women to the extent that they then had to be addressed

using the code of conduct that binds them to their roles and responsibilities, because they also still deem women unfit to lead them as highly influenced by their social background.

In essence, it is safe to conclude that although female teachers qualify to occupy senior executive positions in the governance of the schools, challenges that prohibit them are still hard to ignore, especially because these issues are both internal and external. In a sense, even learners, in general, have been proven to be more respectful towards male teachers and principals than their female counterparts simply because of their gender. As a result, most female teachers who are capable and qualifying to occupy these administrative positions at the schools encounter all these challenges unequivocally; that is why most female teachers remain discouraged and demotivated from applying to occupy this position because when they digest these experiences, they rather opt to just remain as teachers who are dedicated to promoting academic excellence without unnecessary pressure.

One of the most notable responses of all three participants on this issue was mainly the issue of low self-esteem, lack of motivation, and dedication to go all out and achieve what they wanted from most of the female teachers. As these participants gave their responses, to be frank, the most desired responses were those of female participants, considering that the issue pertains to their gender. Still, male principals were allowed to respond based on their experience in the field. Therefore, female participants echoed the general comment of all participants, indicating that most women are not occupying the space because they are lazy, lack motivation, and are afraid to leave their comfort zone. As you commonly know, the positions of governance usually come with a huge amount of responsibility, such as countless meetings, workshops, and other responsibilities.

Most female teachers opt not to apply, given that they consider promotion as an enormous responsibility that may interfere with their personal lives, families, and household duties. Again, almost all females are afraid to occupy the space because of the severe mistreatment they receive from their male counterparts as well. This is because, in most cases, only male principals are generally accepted in societies without being further questioned regarding their leadership skills and abilities. At the same time, on the other side, they are typically perceived as weaklings who cannot command and instill discipline compared to their male counterparts.

As a result, the issue remains persistent: female teachers continue to be subjected to and inferior to their male counterparts, who are more likely to resume the principal's posts and other executive positions in schools. With that being said, the elephant remains in the house for female teachers who desire to climb through the ladder, as they encounter difficulties when they are expected to prove themselves to be worthy, competent, and capable of steering the ship or heading the school as an official, whether as a principal, deputy, HOD, or member of SMT. The situation appears to be unfavourable when all these situations are considered because they clearly illustrate the cause behind the gender imbalance that persists within the governance of schools. However, female teachers make up most of the school teachers with the appropriate qualifications to occupy these positions.

It was sad to learn that societal norms are still influential in how they are in some schools. When all four participants were tasked with considering the influence of society in terms of the governance of the schools, that is where it was identified that the reason why some of the schools are still dominated by male teachers in their administration is simply because certain societies are still influential in terms of making sure that only male principals remain there, as it still entails the stigma that men forever be superior to women. And again, they believe that male teachers can maintain order and instill discipline among teachers and learners. In contrast, on the side of female teachers, it is vice versa, as they are perceived to be weak and always expected to submit to men.

Again, the most challenging part of this issue is that it is not just members in general but also members of the SGB, teachers, and learners from the societies who ensure that, whenever women are occupying

these positions, they are ill-treated and subjected to the status of non-being, so that they eventually resign or relocate. This happens because they still maintain and keep up with norms from the past that certain positions are not meant for women, and that is wrong in the sense that, currently, women are even dominating the field of education as teachers, as well as the most prolific individuals who produce outstanding results as compared to male teachers. Let alone in terms of advanced qualifications that permit them to hold any governmental positions in schools or from the Department of Education.

When the four study's participants stated that female teachers are not prominent in school administration owing to cultural preconceptions and a lack of willingness to enforce laws and regulations encouraging gender parity, these difficulties originate from a lack of awareness and motivation to build an atmosphere that encourages productivity in schools and communities and allows for equal treatment of both genders. The objective is to achieve equal opportunities for women and men and to establish a work climate that is hospitable to all. As a result, for the transition to effectively take place, the participants emphasised the necessity of adequate training and education for members of society, church leaders, all teachers, principals, and members of society, considering that change begins with them before it can be cascaded to the rest of the society members.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

First and foremost, after serious consideration of all the issues unpacked and thoroughly discussed by the participants of the study, it was therefore safe to conclude that to achieve gender parity in the schools of Thabo Mofutsanyane District, The Department of Education, principals of the schools, and teachers' unions must collaborate and ensure that "Women Empowerment Workshops" are facilitated to ensure that all women in the sector of education do retain their self-esteem, self-confidence, and other necessary abilities that enable them to occupy the space rightfully and without further ado. Additionally, these workshops must provide a package to incorporate skills and abilities that strives to help women, in particular, treat one another with the respect they deserve, preserving in consideration that some of the problems became acquainted when other women realised that it was hard to accept their female counterparts in positions such as senior executive positions or as headmasters of schools, which they mistakenly believed were only for men.

All South African teachers enrolled with the Department of Basic Education must attend this mandated training, which focuses on educating all teachers concerning how to conduct themselves towards one another at work. On the other hand, it must also endeavour to equip all teachers with the required skills for leadership so that they are conscious of the extent to which they are protected from any individual who challenges, disrespects, or undermines them merely because of their gender. Furthermore, all teachers must be expected to comprehend the transformation currently taking place because most teachers are still unable to cooperate with female teachers whenever they are in positions of governance, and they typically anticipate male teachers being there. Unfortunately, this knowledge of gender roles must also be imparted by these teachers so that they understand and respond appropriately to the dynamics without offending anyone. Training should be provided to all SMT's and SGB's members to understand school transitions in South Africa, as critical issues remain unaddressed in most societies.

It is emphasised that a society's influence on schools is significant, and involving community members, particularly those in decision-making positions, is crucial in this initiative. These members, including SGB members, church pastors, kings, chiefs, councillors, and mayors, are respected by their communities. Collaborating with them is essential to educate society about gender role changes. The SGB should be at the forefront of this campaign to create a safe environment that respects all genders in roles and responsibilities.

This creates a more inclusive and respectful environment for schools, considering that they now have a choice to be led by any headmaster

without

fearing being subjected to ill-treatment. To further illustrate, female teachers who have always felt inferior to men may regain faith and hope in their opportunities without fear of societal disapproval. Thus, this contributes positively to society and the education system of South Africa, as current statistics still favour female teachers in producing outstanding results over their male counterparts, and again, it also creates a more inclusive and competent education system throughout the country.

Above all, another amicable solution that should be further endorsed is that of the Department of Education maintaining the system of gender ratio that seeks to keep up with gender parity in schools, as they would attempt to balance gender through employing their mechanisms to ensure that, as they allocate teachers to schools from the principal to the teachers in general, gender is balanced by all means. To achieve this, they also make formalities, as they advertise job posts that are specific in terms of gender, to ensure that gender is indeed balanced. Most importantly, the most prominent and prioritised requirements remain academics and past leadership experiences by the post applied for to ensure that they select people who meet the eligibility requirements of the post advertised.

In a nutshell, if societies and communities are completely integrated, there ought to be virtually no doubt that unity symbolise the development, transition, and transformation we all desire to be a part of. The overarching objective of this effort is to establish a safe place and harmonious environment for all, to offer everybody an equal opportunity to reach their full potential in terms of the opportunities they have always desired to reach.

VIII. CONCLUSION

As I had always suspected before the conduction of this study, gender parity in South African education had not yet been completely implemented. But, when you consider the issues that persist in contributing to the underrepresentation of female teachers in school governance, it is a cause for concern, considering that transition has been taking place in all spheres of the country; however, it appears that there are still areas that still perceive women as people who are only meant for home chores, bearing and caring for children, and deeming them unfit to lead any educational institution. This study provided the primary findings, a synopsis, a quick review of the preceding chapters, and proposed remedies to solve the issue at hand. With that stated, it was reasonable to infer that the study's aims and objectives were fulfilled successfully, given that this chapter summarised all the preceding work and replied to the study's research questions.

IX. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this study.

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