

Challenges faced by women leaders as school principals in rural areas

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ABSTRACT

Entrenched socio-cultural stereotypes tend to undermine women's ability to be leaders and managers across the social strata. The experience that informs this report is African. Whereas discrimination and prejudice with respect to women ability to lead and to manage is universal, feminist discourse and the bill of human rights are beginning to impact positively on these stereotypes.

The paper covers the aspects of culture which prevailed in the education set-up in the past and are still prevailing and how these cultural aspects influence the public opinion on the capability of women to lead. Aspects which also create a hostile environment for the free expression of the women's opinions and in public places together with the correct representation in public forums are probed. The paper also examines the extent to which a shift in paradigm of women leaders to influence the public sphere has taken place. Thus the focus of the study is on women leaders who serve as school principals in rural areas.

The research has been conducted in Limpopo Province which is one of the nine provinces of South Africa. Limpopo Province has been selected for this study due to its relevance to the investigation in the sense that it is predominantly rural. The province has a larger population of women and children than men because in most cases men migrate to the urban areas in search of gainful employment.

The research is structured in such a way that it illuminates the challenges that are faced by women leaders in their schools as well as in their communities. The point of departure in this investigation is the fact that most women are

already leading in their households as their partners are based far away from their homes because of work commitments.

However there is a general impression that women are not good leaders. A Northern Sotho proverb which attests to that thought states that: "Tsa etwa ke ya tshadi pele di wela leopeng" which means: "if a leader is a woman, disaster is bound to happen". The findings of the investigation as well as the recommendations are outlined in the full paper.

INTRODUCTION

Entrenched socio-cultural stereotypes against women cut across color. At this modern age there are people who still believe that women are incapable of leading. These women in most cases find themselves undermined especially if they may happen to climb the social strata. Thus such type of thinking devalues human liberation efforts. "The absence of women from political life and leadership positions undermines democracy and women's empowerment" (New York, UN Headquarters: 28 February).

Women in leadership positions in the rural areas are hard hit by prejudices because most men in such areas are the staunch custodians of culture. According to Bapedi culture which forms a greater part of the Limpopo Province a woman is not supposed to lead. Hence the proverb "Tsa etwa key a tshadi pele di wela leopeng" meaning "if a leader is a woman, disaster is bound to happen"

It should however be noted that amongst the Bapedi tribes there are those like Balubedu who only have women as their chiefs e.g. the rain Queen in Modjadji. They are however in minority. The public sphere prevailing in Limpopo does not encourage rural women to occupy leadership positions; hence there are still less than 50% of women principals in the schools.

Heferran (2008:1) maintains that while rural women are often silent, hidden and under-appreciated, they represent probably the world's most powerful untapped natural resource, and they are surely more than ever before a key to world stability and understanding. There is a saying that goes like "if you educate a man you educate an individual and that if you educate a woman you educate the nation". Thus the saying alludes to the strategic position that the women occupy in society and in their homes.

An exploratory study was conducted in the three areas of Limpopo Province, namely, Capricorn, Sekhukhune and Waterberg. Limpopo Province in which this study took place is one of the nine provinces of the Republic of South Africa. Botha (2007:1) agrees that Limpopo Province is situated in the Northeastern corner of the country and it shares international borders with Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Limpopo Province has five districts, namely, Capricorn, Mopani, Vhembe, Sekhukhune and Waterberg.

The aim of the investigation was to probe into challenges that women principals face both in their schools and in their communities. It was discovered through the study that women principals find it hard to make a significant impact in terms of knowledge due to the prejudices that are prevailing in their communities.

Furthermore, women principals found themselves double disadvantaged in the sense that they had to prove to their communities that they are capable of leading and also to work harder than their male counterparts. In most cases they worked in the environment that did not fully support them.

Historical background

African perception on knowledge and leadership has a lot to do with its colonization historical background. Most Africans were made to believe that their knowledge system was primitive and that as Africans they needed white leadership to survive. Songca (2006:226) states that African indigenous

knowledge systems were ignored and undermined. This was further filtered to women who according to the African tradition were being classified together with children and thus undermined.

In South Africa the ideology of looking down upon African women with respect to their leadership skills was further perpetrated by the apartheid regime, which segregated people according to race and culture. Women felt the double oppression as they were oppressed by the apartheid regime and by their communities. Their knowledge and personal experiences were rated as zero.

Curriculum in South Africa was designed in such a way that it strengthened the ideology that blacks were inferior and that they cannot govern. Girls were also not given equal opportunities within African communities as boys to attend school. They were left to assist with the household chores. Hence the saying, a woman's place is in the kitchen.

Versfeld (2005: 7) observed the following concerning the then curricula:

- The Great Trek was traditionally a favorite topic for inclusion in the History Curriculum, while the Mfecane, another highly significant movement of people in southern Africa, was generally omitted.
- Some individuals were selected for study over others. Florence Nightingale featured in many textbooks while Cecilia Makiwane, the first qualified black nurse in the whole of Africa, who came from the Eastern Cape, seldom found a place in textbooks.

Irrespective of great examples concerning the contribution of women in society like in the case of Cecilia Makiwane and Florence Nightingale, society refused to embrace the capability of women to influence and even to lead.

Women leaders need to be developed with the purpose of uplifting the lives of the African community. This could be done through embracing the indigenous concept of Ubuntu. According to Teffo (2006: 23) the concept of Ubuntu can be well defined in the African proverbs which says:” Motho ke motho ka batho” (Man is a man through other people) and Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” (a person depends on persons to be a person).

Knowledge paradigm shift should encourage Africans at large and South Africans in particular to acknowledge and use their experiences as well as expertise within their context. Mbigi (1995: 99) maintains that South Africans need Afro-centric leadership model with its emphasis on visibility and constituent sensitivity as well as service. He further emphasized that within that context of leadership, “shifting of perceptions and expansion of perspectives is a must” (Mbigi 1995: 81).

Leadership in South Africa will have to play a major role in shifting the perception of people about leadership and knowledge. African leaders will have to serve as examples in recognize the leadership of women. That will have to start with tribal leaders and other male traditional leaders. According to Teffo (2006:22) indigenous leaders should adopt from culture those traits that typify people as Africans and promote peace and harmony in the universal order of things.

South Africans should be encouraged to be proud of their culture, leadership and commodities. This however should be done with care as Jansen (2007:4) has observed that even though South Africans have ten years in democracy, they are still struggling with who they are. Thus women will have to define who they are in their communities.

Theoretical framework

This investigation is based on Afro-centric theory of leadership and management as well as on the theory of African socialism which emphasizes social change. According to Teffo (2006:28) the Afro-centric theory advocates for the infusion of cultural values in the field of management, industrial and labour relations.

African socialism on the other hand according to Wikipedia (2007:1) emphasizes a belief in sharing resource in a `traditional` African way. Many African politicians and leaders of the 1950s and 1960s professed their support for African socialism. African identity and socialism were often intertwined. Some leaders even claimed that Africa had always been `socialist` and appealed to socialism as a unifying cultural element for Africans. Thus social revolution is usually supported by socialism.

Higgs (2006:3) states that proponents of the social construction of knowledge acknowledge the role that human beings play in knowledge production. Human beings do so by embedding knowledge in socio-economic, socio-cultural and political contexts. This means that knowledge is ideological in that it only exists in the context of those who claim to produce it. Therefore that does not have to exclude women.

Thus social change will inform knowledge perception as women will view themselves in the right context. This implies that women are to a certain extent solely responsible for the transformation of the mindset of people around them. They will have to reflect on their history, be patient, set goals, work systematically towards change and be committed to their course. They will have to defy capitalist exploitation, whereby women are included in higher position just for window dressing and conformity to Affirmative action. Women want to be placed in higher positions because they are capable and not only to be unfairly affirmed.

Zeleza (2006: 195) states that African studies – the production of African knowledges –has concrete and conceptual, and material and moral contexts which create the variations that are so evident across the world and across discipline. Therefore the Africa studies centers or structures need to be reinforced and supported so that a change in perception on women leadership can occur.

Previous post apartheid investigation revolved around leadership issues. Luhabe (2007:4) observed that a constant question that the people ask is the “fitness of Africans including women, to be in leadership positions”. She further stated that the media is a threat to democracy and that lack of robust debate by the public about the role of media in building a nation could result in the media assaulting the characters of the African women leaders.

Therefore South African women will have to develop a peculiar way of facing the challenges of being undermined and of reconstructing the development of the nation.

Research Methodology

A qualitative research approach was used in the study to gather data. A questionnaire was designed and used in the investigation. A questionnaire that was used was first given to an expert in the field for validity and verification.

Questions in the questionnaire were divided into three sections. The first section required that the participants give biographical information, the second set of questions required yes or no answers and the last section was based on open-ended type of questions.

Sample was selected through Purposive Sampling method since other areas were inaccessible and the sample was limited by the nature of the study. Thus 21 women principals participated in the study. Seven were selected from each district. The principals selected were from both primary and secondary schools. This is due to the fact that the principals may face similar problems as leaders irrespective of the levels of their schools.

Findings

The following were identified by the study as challenges that women principals face:

- They have to convince men in their schools and surrounding communities that they are capable of leading
- They have to work extra hard in their schools as compared to their male counterparts who are readily accepted in their communities
- They are scrutinized for what they wear especially if they have to address parents' meetings
- Some communities do not accept women who wear trousers
- Boys from initiation schools tend to undermine their authority
- Such boys tend to associate discipline with physical power
- Male educators find it difficult to submit to the authority of a woman
- Women principals in most cases find themselves not being fully accepted by the communities they work with.

- They do not get the support from other female colleagues who would also like to work with male leaders.
- They are made to feel that their contributions to society are not important
- They are challenged by educators who think that women principals are not knowledgeable on labor issues
- Tribal authorities undermine their leadership by being vocal about their wish for a male principal in their area
- Lack of parental involvement becomes rife in female headed institutions
- Some male parents refuse to serve in the SGBs of female headed schools
- Some male colleague principals do not give them support
- Cultural issues become more conspicuous especially if the female principal works in a different cultural set up, e.g. a Sepedi speaking principal in the Xitsonga speaking area.

Discussion

Women principals find themselves fully accepted as leaders in the communities they work with after a lot of hard work and sacrifices. This is not the case with their male counter parts that are readily accepted as leaders in various communities.

Women principals also cited the fact that some male parents would not want to serve in their SGBs on the basis that they cannot work with women or work

under a leadership of a woman. Such type of occurrences depict how stereotypes can actually make one lose on important issues like contributing meaningfully to the education of a child.

The fact that women are already leading in their households should not be ignored. This occurs mostly whereby husbands have to migrate to other areas in search of gainful employment.

Cultural stereotypes and other prejudices against women make it impossible for women to actualize their potential. Thus women should not be disadvantaged on the basis of their gender. They should be judged on the basis of their actions just like men.

Rural communities will have to be taught to respect women leaders and put aside their traditional mindset. Communities should be made to look beyond themselves and think globally. They should be made to see the great contributions made by women. Thus change in the local arena will facilitate change in the global village.

Women should not be made to view the world as being male dominant. They should be in the position to see their role in the whole society. An enabling environment should be created to enable both males and females to influence the public sphere equally.

Women principals and all the other people should not feel obliged to work only amongst people of their cultural group. The Sepedi speaking principal should not feel disadvantaged to work with the Xitsonga speaking community. Such type of thinking leads also to instances of xenophobia.

Conclusion

Stereotypes that exist against women in general and against those in leadership in particular should be addressed. Communities should be made aware that sound leadership does not depend on gender.

A space for women to actualize their potential will have to be created. Women should be allowed to influence communities they work in just like their male counter parts or even better.

There is a need in society towards a paradigm shift towards women's capability to lead. Issues surrounding a person's cultural group should also be dealt away with.

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