

## The persistence of gender inequality in Zimbabwe: factors that impede the advancement of women into leadership positions in primary schools

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*We investigated and analysed the factors that women teachers consider as barriers to their advancement to headship positions in Zimbabwean primary schools. Specifically, we sought to identify the factors perceived by women school heads to be causes of persistent under-representation of women in school headship positions. Data were collected through structured face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions with 13 experienced women school heads. The findings revealed that although the majority of the women teachers in the study sample were qualified for promotion to school headship positions, they had not attempted to apply for them. The majority of the women teachers in the study sample were adequately qualified for promotion to school headship positions. Indeed, a large number of them either had a university degree or were pursuing degree studies and also had extensive experience. But most of them had not attempted to apply for school headship and hence were still class teachers. Gender stereotypes were shown to be one of the major causes of persistent under-representation of women in primary school headship. The influence of gender role stereotypes was found to manifest in the form of low self esteem; lack of confidence; women's perception that their role in the family overrides all other roles; and lack of support from the home and the workplace.*

**Keywords:** family responsibility; gender inequality; gender stereotypes; lack of confidence; lack of support; low self esteem; qualitative study; school headship

### Introduction

Zimbabwe has always strived to achieve gender equality since its political independence in 1980. Over the years, in its continued commitment to removal of all forms of sex discrimination in the society, the government has alluded to several national and international gender declarations and conventions. Among these are the 1965 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD); and the 1979 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (National Gender Policy, 2004:1). In the process, many policies were put in place to advance gender equality. The gender affirmative action policy of 1992, the 1999 Nziramasanga Commission, and the National Gender Policy of 2004 are illustrative.

In 1999, the Nziramasanga Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training in Zimbabwe presented its findings noting, among other things, that gender disparities persisted at all levels of education (Nziramasanga Commission, 1999:173). As a follow up, the Zimbabwean government launched the

National Gender Policy in March 2004 whose goal, *inter alia*, was “to eliminate all negative economic, social and political policies, cultural and religious practices that impede equality and equity of sexes” (National Gender Policy, 2004:3). One of the objectives of the policy is “to promote equal opportunities for women and men in decision making in all areas and all levels” (National Gender Policy, 2004:3). In response to the above policy, the Public Service Commission sent a circular, referenced G/46/200 dated 30 April 2004, to all government ministries requesting input as to how best gender balance could be attained in their respective ministries. However, in spite of these measures there appears to be little impact in practice. For example, in the education sector, there are far fewer women heads than men in Zimbabwean primary schools.

In many countries, concerns about gender disparities in education have focused on student performance, particularly “in terms of under-achievement of girls, differences in access at various levels of schooling, dropout rates in subjects taken and these have evoked a range of explanations and policies around gender gaps in educational outcomes” (Davies, 1990:61). However, the question of gender disparities in the management structures of schools and colleges has received little attention, despite the fact that “there is recognition in education of both the importance of equal opportunity and the strengths that women bring to management” (Coleman, 1994:117). Under-representation of women in educational management is not only experienced in Zimbabwe, but in many other countries too. Coleman (2001:175) noted that “women in educational management are a minority in the UK, but they are also in a minority in most other countries, both those in comparable levels of development and those that constitute the newly emerging economies”. On that note, the common assertion, that “women teach and men manage” in schools, still holds true despite a multitude of strategies to rectify the gender imbalance in educational management (Greyvenstein & Van der Westhuizen, 1992:271). In an effort to redress the situation, researches on under-representation of women in management have been carried out in some countries as discussed here.

A review of literature by authorities such as Logan (1999), Peterson and Runyan (1999), Davidson and Burke (1994), Shakeshaft (1989), and Coleman (1994), among others, reflects much debate and discourse about the principal reasons for the under-representation of women in educational management. However, it is clear that this mainly concerns developed countries such as the UK and the USA. In South Africa, the issue has received the attention of some researchers in the past years (Greyvenstein & Van der Westhuizen, 1992). In Zimbabwe there have been some debates on women and leadership which led to the development of policies intended to increase women’s participation in decision making positions generally and in school headships in particular. However, it has not been clearly established why under-representation of women still persists.

In an attempt to address the gender equality issues in Zimbabwe, the

Labour Relations Act was introduced in 1985. It states that, “no employer should discriminate against any employee on the grounds of race, tribe or place of origin, political opinion, colour, creed or sex.” Other legislation put in place included the Legal Age of Majority Act, Equal Pay Regulations and Sexual Discrimination Removal Act, to mention only a few.

These enactments had varying impact at different levels of the education system. At the school level, increment in the enrolment of girls rose by 49.0% at primary school level, 41.4% at Form 4 level, and 34.0% at Form 6 level by 1993 (Dorsey, 1996:18). At tertiary level, universities realised an increase of 30.2% while primary teachers’ colleges achieved 50.1% in the enrolment of female students (Chabaya, 1997). However, in the area of educational management, women remained glaringly under-represented; in primary school headship positions too. In the case of universities, Gaidzamwa (1992:10) pointed out that “the University (of Zimbabwe) provided an atmosphere and opportunities for female academics with little experience to join in administration, but the higher levels of university administration remained male dominated”. Other research, conducted by Gaidzamwa in 1992, revealed that only 12.0% of senior public positions were held by women in Zimbabwe (UNICEF Update, 1994:3).

In response to the persistent gender disparity in decision-making positions in Zimbabwe, the government introduced the gender affirmative action policy in 1992. In turn, the Public Service Commission responded to the affirmative action policy by coming up with specific policies meant to expedite the promotion of women teachers to headship positions in both primary and secondary schools. For example, Public Service Circular No.11 (1991:2) states that heads should identify women who could be promoted to headship grade without reference to seniority and recommend them to be given schools to head. Public Service Circular No.22 (1996) and Public Service Circular No.1 (1997) encouraged women teachers to apply for school management posts. All these were measures taken to speed up the promotion of more women teachers to school leadership positions.

By contrast, as of June 2004, there were 246 secondary school heads in Masvingo province but of this figure, only 14 (5.60%) were female heads and 8 (3.25%) were female deputy heads (Chabaya, pers.comm., June 2004). In the case of primary schools, there were a total of 693 school heads and only 68 (9.81%) were female heads while 56 (8.08%) were female deputy heads (Chabaya, pers. comm., 2004). The figures suggested barriers to leadership that were much stronger and perhaps of a different type to the barriers to women’s education (Longwe & Clarke, 1999:12). In relation to the extent to which Zimbabwe has achieved gender equality among its citizens, a 1998 Human Development Report on Zimbabwe described the country as being a “highly unequal society”. Additionally, Zimbabwe ranked only 109th in the global gender rates relative to access, control and ownership of economic resources and position of decision-making (National Gender Policy, 2004:1).

It can be seen from this background that in Zimbabwe, policies and legis-

lations have been put in place designed to address the problem of women's under-representation in positions of educational leadership, yet gender inequalities persist. Hence in this study we investigated and analysed the factors that women teachers consider as barriers to their advancement to headship positions in Zimbabwean primary schools. Specifically, we sought to identify factors perceived by women school heads to be causes of persistent under-representation of women in school headship positions.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

A purposive convenience sample of nine experienced women school heads were interviewed in this study while four women deputy heads and nine senior teachers participated in three focus group discussions. One focus group comprised the four deputy heads while the other two focus groups were made up of four and five senior teachers, respectively. All the participants were drawn from the urban and semi-urban schools of one city and this arrangement saved on the issue of fuel since Zimbabwe was experiencing serious fuel shortages at the time data were being collected. Permission was sought from the Education Regional Director before collecting data from the school heads. Thomas and Nelson (2001:281) observed that, "convenience sampling is used in some case studies because the purpose of the study is not to estimate some population value, but to select cases from which one can learn most".

### **Instruments**

Open-ended interviews and focus group discussions were used to collect data in this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine women school heads. Semi-structured interviews are compatible with feminist ideals in that they offer women the chance to speak out on the issues that concern them and to construct an agenda on matters of central importance rather than the researchers imposing their own views on them (Mahlase, 1997:28). All the interviews were held in the interviewees' offices during working hours except for one who opted to have the interview conducted in the evening at her house. Each interview session was roughly 60 minutes long. Bennett, Glatter and Le Vacic (1994:36) point out that "spending an equal amount of interview time with each interviewee ensures consistency which leads to trustworthiness of the study". The focus group discussions with women heads were held in the office of one of the participating woman heads.

In interviews, it is important for the researcher to record as much detail as possible (Deem, 2002:840). Therefore to capture detailed sets of notes during interviews, an audio recording cassette was used in order to enhance the accuracy and trustworthiness of the data collected. The focus group interviews concentrated mainly on participants' views and experiences pertaining to promotion of women to leadership posts in schools. For data analysis, data were grouped according to themes.

## Findings

In trying to identify the causes of persistent under representation of women in school headship from the data collected, using the interviews and focus group discussions, the following themes emerged: family attachment; low self esteem and lack of support. The themes are discussed in detail.

### Family attachment

Family attachment was found to be the major reason why women teachers did not apply for school headship positions. Women were found not to be prepared to take up positions away from their husbands and children. In fact, given a choice between career advancement in places away from the family and staying with ones' family, most women appeared to prefer the latter. As Dorsey (1996:30) explains; "from an early age, daughters are groomed for their marriage roles of wife, mother and food provider ... and they are conditioned from an early age to believe that a woman is inferior to a man and that her place is in the home".

One interview participant said the following about family attachment:

*"Most women do not want to apply for the posts saying perhaps I will be posted somewhere far away from my family. That is the major reason why I talked to some female teachers who are now qualified to be heads and they were saying they are not eager to take the posts because of the location of the schools."*

The above response suggests that preference for staying with one's family discouraged some women teachers from applying for school headship posts. Similarly, another interviewee expressed why she had not initially applied for school headship:

*"I asked myself how I was going to manage my family. I also wanted my husband near me ... I consulted some lady teachers and they said to me, "U-u-u-m-m, murume haasiwi (U-u-u-m-m, a husband should never be left alone). You are going to destroy your own marriage" .... Then you start to ask yourself and say, "Do I want power on the expense of my family?" ... I got a post away from my family. This was an advantage to my career but a disadvantage to my family. When you are away, for a long time, your husband at times starts going out with other women. Automatically you get frustrated."*

This interviewee clearly demonstrates the dilemma that women teachers face in making decisions related to taking up promotion/leadership posts. The respondent is willing to get the promotion, but, "the cultural conditioning is a hindrance to her decision" to take up the headship position (Dorsey, 1996). Moreover, since she was already a school head, she felt she did not make a wise decision in taking the headship position.

A third interviewee included the dimension of HIV&AIDS among the reasons advanced by women teachers for not taking up headship posts away from their families. She stated:

*"The first reason is family attachment. Women do not want to leave their husbands. Even if both are teachers, the wife will be given a school away*

*from the husband. You hear ladies saying I do not want to apply because I do not want to leave my husband especially these days with the HIV/AIDS pandemic. People want to stay with their spouses."*

This would suggest, it appears, that apart from reasons of cultural conditioning, women tend to turn down promotion posts associated with geographical mobility in fear of exposing their spouses and themselves to HIV&AIDS.

Focus group discussants also pointed to similar reasons as to why women teachers do not apply for school headship posts. The following emerged from respondents in one focus group discussion:

*"Women do not apply because of fear of HIV&AIDS, husbands may look for replacements. Children won't be well cared for. African men can't take care of children and home ... Yes, small numbers get promoted because culturally women concentrate on looking after husbands and children."*

The focus group discussants above suggested that some women believe that the role of looking after children is mainly for women and that men cannot look after children. As a result, women found it difficult to look for employment away from their spouses and children. Similarly, Mahlase (1997:90) in her study of South African women teachers, found that women teachers often refused promotions on account of their families because they cannot move easily since their family residence is usually determined by the location of the husband.

In short, the participants thought that women avoided working far away from their families fearing that their spouses may be tempted to go for other women during their absence and this might lead to contracting of HIV&AIDS. In line with the idea that promotion is usually associated with mobility, Glass (2000:4) correctly pointed out that, "superintendents are not usually hired from within. This means the superintendent's family has to move after she has left the classroom. This mobility discourages some women from applying for the posts".

#### Low-self esteem and lack of confidence

Another explanation advanced for the under-representation of women in school headship positions concerned women's low self-esteem and lack of confidence. Interestingly, myths, stereotypes and prejudices related to the abilities and attitudes of women were seen by the participants to be among obstacles encountered for representation of women in management positions.

In her survey of women managers Smith (1984:58) observed:

*... many women have to a certain degree internalized the attitudes and role expectations about women, that they have learnt to fit neatly into the stereotypes. This can be a major handicap in the development of their individual personalities, their abilities and career potential.*

Coleman (2004:7) observes that in surveys conducted in the 1990s and in 2004 in the UK, women were found to be "more likely than men to refer to lack of confidence or their own perceived faults that stopped them thinking they could become school heads". Similarly, Aschwanden (in Sebakwane,

1994) also observed that gender socialization was practised, not to prejudice the child against the other sex, but to let it grow “naturally” into its predestined role and to make the child look forward with pleasure to its allotted task. This in a way shows that although gender socialization in a patriarchal society creates discrimination between men and women, it takes place in such a way that both men and women accept it without force. Women teachers’ perceptions of gender roles and of what women can and cannot do is influenced by gender socialization. Responses from interviewees and focus group discussants precisely illustrate this pattern, as discussed here:

One interviewee mentioned that, “*women are not courageous enough to accept big roles*”. The following sentiments also emerged in the focus group discussions:

*“Social background has influences — women have multiple roles — e.g. wife, mother, worker, etc. We grew up in families where women were not leaders. So this affects us. We feel we should be led. Women are naturally not bold. Women feel inferior naturally and believe that men should be leaders.”*

In addition, the following was also said in another focus group:

*“They (women teachers) feel these are men’s positions. Culturally we should be lower. Women do not want to have higher positions than their husbands.”*

The above responses show that the stereotypes embedded in the way women are socialized hinder their movement into school headship positions. The responses above reflect that some women see leadership roles as something not meant for them as women. Similar observations were made by Coleman (2001) when she commented that in a society where men are more likely to be leaders and where women have been stereotyped into playing a subordinate and supportive role, it is not entirely surprising that women are less likely to plan a career that includes leadership. In an attempt to describe how this type of attitude develops in women, Al Khalifa (1989:34) said that “some women reject moving into educational management as a consequence of what they see as its masculinism and its inappropriate technician and hierarchical system of control”.

Smulyan (2000) also found that all the three women principals in her study sample initially hesitated, wondering if they had what it took to be an administrator in a system in which leadership tended to be defined in terms of male dominance, authority and power. All women in the project described being “*pushed*” into principalship by others. In other words, women tend to find it difficult to make independent decisions related to their own advancement. Referring to causes of such a state of affairs, Dorsey (1996:30) points out that “the expected blind obedience and submission inhibit the development of initiative and independent thought” (in women). In other words, the socialization of women into stereotypes that make them have a lower status to men influences them to have less confidence in making decisions on their own.

A number of variables which impede women teachers' promotion into headship positions indicated that women saw themselves as their own worst enemy in so far as promotional prospects were concerned. They placed limitations on their own abilities as was pointed out by one interviewee who said:

*"women (teachers) have a low self-esteem, but their qualifications are quite good most of them ... women say the post is challenging and has so many problems"*.

Such responses were also noted by Coleman (1994) when she commented that studies that look at the reasons why women were less likely than men to become headteachers revealed lack of confidence on the part of women in applying for jobs and a relative hesitancy in developing career plans.

Likewise one focus group pointed out that, *"women have low self-esteem and assume that men have to occupy higher roles than them"*.

#### Lack of support

Quite a number of interview participants and focus group discussants pointed out that gender imbalance in school headship is caused by the fact that women are not getting the necessary support from their families and from the education system itself. That is why some of them did not apply for headship posts or if they did, they did not readily accept them. Following are the participants' remarks relating to the above aspect:

*"Husbands do not want to release their wives to be heads. At times it is not said but it is felt that their wives will get into affairs if they go to head schools far away from them."*

*"It is difficult to change the long existing system — lack of family support".*

*"Promotion brings changes — negative changes."*

*"With such change you may be mistaken for a mistress."*

*"Husbands sometimes are not happy with demanding duties (if the wife is a head)."*

*"Men want their women home during non-working hours — they do not tolerate off time duties."*

Clearly, the above participants attributed lack of support from the family as one of the factors that contribute to the persistent under-representation of women in school headship positions.

It also surfaced in the focus groups that women had problems in applying for headship posts because they needed to consult their husbands before applying. If a husband does not approve, then she will not apply. For example, in one focus group discussion it was said that, *"they (women teachers) consult husbands first ... if they agree ok, if not, they abandon the application"*.

Some participants in the sample claimed that women were discriminated against and kept from promotion by the education system just because they were women. They felt that discrimination was implicit in the organizational structure or in the attitudes of those in authority. So in referring to the interview panels for the headship posts, one interviewee stated that, *"panels of interviewers are mainly men and they are biased — those who appoint have*



*a negative attitude towards female heads*". These responses confirm observations made by Wallin (1999) in Canada when she pointed out that the greatest cause of under-representation of women in educational management was due to sex discrimination in recruitment and promotion. "If hiring committees preserve and promote sexist attitudes towards women, it is almost impossible for women to break the 'glass ceiling' which exists within educational administration" (Wallin, 1999:8).

Another factor related to lack of support was highlighted by some participants' claim that some women did not apply for promotion to be school heads because if they were to be promoted, their spouses and the society would question their moral uprightness. For example, one interviewee observed:

*"Husbands do not want to release their wives to be heads ... Some men feel that their wives will get into affairs if they go to head schools far away from them."*

On a similar note, focus group discussions revealed that at times the community did not support promotion of women but, instead, viewed it with suspicion. For example, in one focus group, it was observed that:

*"People analyse why people get some positions. Some suspect shoddy deals and as such some do not want to be discussed. There is no rumour if it is a man."*

Likewise another focus group supported the above sentiments thus:

*"Promotion brings change — negative change. With such changes you may be mistaken for a mistress. Husbands sometimes are not happy with demanding duties (if wife is school head). Men want their women home during non-working hours and do not tolerate off-time duties."*

In other words, promotion of women is viewed with suspicion and promotion of women on merit is doubted. But when men are promoted, they are not viewed negatively. Glass (2000:4) rightly observed:

The average superintendent spends more than 50 hours a week at work including night meetings and sporting events. This type of work week often is not appealing to younger women and to people who prefer a better balance between work and family life.

Accordingly, some women teachers would avoid promotion in fear of being viewed negatively by society and so they have to get permission first from the husbands before they apply. This implies that women still look for other individuals to make decisions for them in spite of the gender equity policies which have been put in place in the country.

In summary, the triangulated data collected through the interviews and the focus group discussions clearly reflect that most of the participants attributed the causes of gender imbalances in primary school headship to women's non-application for the posts for reasons that included reluctance to separate from their families, low self esteem, lack of confidence and lack of support from significant others because of how they are viewed by society and men and the education system.

## **Discussion**

The results of the study as presented above show gender stereotypes as one of the major causes of persistent under-representation of women in primary school headship. In this study, the influence of gender role stereotypes was found to manifest in the form of low self esteem, lack of confidence and the women's perception that their role in the family overrides all other roles and the lack of support from the home and the workplace. How stereotypes influence each of these findings is discussed here.

### **Low self esteem and stereotypes**

Low self esteem and lack of confidence, as reflected in the findings, explain why some women do not apply for school headship and most of those who did only applied after being encouraged by someone else. These findings are not new. According to Logan (2003:4) research findings reveal that in some cases women do not apply for promotion posts because they lack the confidence to venture into leadership roles. Here the following questions arise: Why do women have low self esteem and lack confidence when it comes to occupation of leadership roles? Does being a woman mean that one is unable to lead? In relation to these questions, Capper (1993:95) explains:

As far as I can determine from my work and the work of others, one's biological identification as male or female has very little to do with how people behave and the work they do in school. One's gender identification however, has a tremendous influence on behaviour, perceptions and effectiveness.

It may be inferred that the biological make-up of men and women does not generally count in actual leadership. Differences emerge only after gender socialization. Hymowitz (2006) argued that there is little difference between the leadership styles of successful male and female managers. In other words, one's sex does not necessarily matter as far as work in the school is concerned. However, gender, which is socially acquired and, in some cases, riddled with stereotypes, influences the perceived capabilities and aspirations of individuals. Therefore, due to the way they are socialized, women just assume that they cannot operate in the so-called male territories. Worse still, they make these assumptions without even bothering to find out what the roles entail.

Peterson and Runyan (1999) pointed out that low self esteem is believed to be inherent in traditional stereotyped feminine traits. Such barriers are referred to as intrinsic barriers and are believed to be psychological and personal (Greyvenstein, 1990). Intrinsic barriers are said to manifest as deficiencies and inadequacies inherent in women. It appears that the intrinsic perceptions manifest in sex roles and sex role socialization, psychological expectations and career expectations (Van Deventer & Van der Westhuizen, 2000).

Another factor forwarded to explain why women accept the subordinate role and have low self esteem is conditioning. Heywood (1992:258) advances the arguments of feminists thus:

Inherent women are conditioned to a passive sexual role which has repressed their true sexuality as well as the more active and adventurous side of their personalities and that the different roles of men and women have their origin in the process of conditioning from a very early age where boys and girls are encouraged to conform to specific gender identities.

In other words, due to gender-role stereotyping which stipulates the expected characteristics of being feminine, women tend to make deliberate efforts to be passive and avoid venturing into the so called men's roles. This may be an explanation for why women in this case study failed to apply for the school headship positions. Although we found that some of them have the necessary educational qualifications and experience as noted in the study, still they find it difficult to apply. Such a scenario contributes to the persistence of gender imbalances in primary school headship.

On the issue of conditioning, it has been found out that stereotypes are so entrenched in the minds of some women that they strongly believe low self esteem to be a "natural" thing for women. Dorsey (1996:30) states "a girl is conditioned to believe that women are inferior to men, that her place is in the home and that she is therefore there to be seen and not to be heard". In other words, the fact that women believe that it is "natural" for men and women to occupy different gender roles makes it difficult for them to decide to enter into roles associated with men, such as leading institutions. As a result, the paucity of women in primary school headship positions and other sectors of society is perpetuated.

In addition, it is believed that stereotypes reproduce inequalities by being self fulfilling in that "if we expect certain behaviours, we may act in ways that in fact create and reinforce such behaviours" (Peterson & Runyan, 1999:35). For example, in this case study, women teachers depicted themselves as individuals who could not hold leadership roles, and who did not have the qualities to be leaders as is expected in the feminine gender roles. As a result, women did not apply for school headship positions and this serves to reinforce the stereotypic notion that women cannot be leaders. In other words, women socialized in such a way may find it difficult to opt to hold a public office such as being a school head and, hence, would not apply when advertisements for such posts come out.

Similarly, Van Deventer (nee Kirchner) & Van der Westhuizen (2000:235) also add that the "stereotypical notion of women as inadequate beings has gradually become entrenched in the collective consciousness affecting the way in which individuals apprehend and interpret the world around them". If the collective conscience is affected by these gender stereotypes, it means that those distorted assumptions about the roles of women and their capabilities are accepted by the society. In brief, women teachers tended to underrate themselves due to the ways they were socialized and, in the process, avoided applying for leadership posts. Such sentiments are derived from some cultural stereotypes held in Zimbabwe, where the husband is viewed as the breadwinner and the one who determines where the family should be stationed.

The relationship between the lack of support that women teachers fail to get as far as promotion is concerned and stereotypes is discussed next.

### Lack of support and stereotypes

Lack of support from family members and the institutional context was found to be one of the causes of under-representation of women in school headship. The central issue in such a situation is that males who are socialized to have an upper hand in a patriarchal society tend to exclude women from areas of power. According to this model, those in power, mainly men, tend not to support women for leadership roles, whether in the family or in the workplace.

In describing the gender role inequalities, Riches (1988:43) explains the matter in terms of the “discrimination model” where one group excludes the other. To make matters worse these stereotypes influence both men and women equally and, in the process, the family members and those in charge of promotions. In such a situation, the following questions arise: If family members and those responsible for promotion are also subjected to gender role stereotypes, will they support promotion of women at the workplace? The answer is that women would not get the support for promotion to school headship. For example, Davidson and Burke (1994:41) observe that, “stereotypical attitudes have a negative influence on the selection, placement and promotion of women to managerial positions”. In brief, because women are socialized into a society where patriarchal relations predominate, they have limited individual choices about their career progress. For example, “if a woman has all the qualities required for promotion, but selectors think that the woman’s place is to be in the home looking after her children and that perhaps mothers make unreliable workers, then individual worth will not be taken into account sufficiently” (Riches, 1988:41). In fact, some participants in this study pointed out that when they attended interviews, almost all the interviewers were men. One may ask: Would such a panel easily appoint women? Obviously not, because women applicants would not fit into the “old-boys” network or the “buddy system” of such circles.

Equally, male cultural domination has been observed to contribute to women’s lack of support in seeking leadership roles. Hansot and Tyack (1981: 41) explained this point: “... it is because the world is defined and run by men, and women attempt to operate in it as such”. Similarly, Shakeshaft (1989:17) referred to the ideology of androcentricism as “the elevation of the masculine to the level of the universal and ideal and the honouring of men and the male principle above women and the female” prevails. Accordingly, such an ideology renders women inferior and society seeks to perpetuate this hierarchy. Once labelled inferior, women would not be considered for leadership roles by men and worse still, by other women. Obviously, these circumstances are bound to perpetuate under-presentation of women in leadership roles. Shakeshaft (1989:94) points out that “men and women divide labour on the basis of sex and male tasks are more valued than female ones”. Such patriarchal and androcentric tendencies hold male values in great esteem and regard female values and experiences as less significant (Coleman, 1994:187).

All these factors relate to the socialization both men and women are subjected to and both accept this imbalance in society without question. This reinforces the stereotypes which then define the preconceived capabilities of women and men and their proper place in the power hierarchies. The above discussion demonstrates the effects of gender stereotypes on men's and women's orientation to life. The effects of stereotypes on family roles are discussed in the next section.

### Family roles and stereotypes

It was noted that women teachers' prefer to be near the home and the family at the expense of their own promotion to headship positions. This was one of the reasons participants in this study gave for not applying for school headship posts. For some of the respondents, the idea that women have the 'natural' role of looking after children, husbands and the home takes precedence over their career advancement. This may be due to the subtleness of stereotypes. It is argued that stereotypes "naturalize" inequalities by presenting subordinate groups negatively as inferior, undesirable or threatening. Thus due to their subtleness and "natural" appearance, stereotypes are likely to be difficult to eradicate (Peterson & Runyan, 1999:35).

Women's prioritization of family roles at the expense of their career advancement is not new. For example, Logan (1999:4) observes: "culturally defined, desirable feminine behaviour was nurturing and caring for others, placing importance on relationships and the quality of life". This may be the reason why women teachers in this study gave preference to the family roles rather than to their own career advancement and so shunned applying for posts especially those far away from their families.

Riches (1988:43) referred to women's perceived role of family care as the "woman's place" model. The role is driven by conformity with social norms and stereotypic gender roles among others. All this is maintained by "the socialization and sex-role stereotyping" which explains why women do tend not to associate themselves with school management (Peterson & Runyan, 1999).

### Conclusions

Our findings in the study have shown that the majority of the women teachers in the sample were adequately qualified for promotion to school headship positions. Indeed, a large number of them either had a university degree or were pursuing degree studies. In contrast, most of them did not attempt to apply for school headship and hence were still class teachers. Therefore, one reason for the persistent under-representation of women in school leadership roles was found to be their continued preference for family responsibilities at the expense of their own career development. Responses indicated that most women teachers allow or perceive their family responsibilities as a barrier that prevents them from applying for a headship post even though they are qualified for the positions. This may be due to the way girls and women have been socialised which makes them believe in the overriding importance of being a

mother and wife first. All other responsibilities or possibilities must then play second fiddle. If not addressed, such established cultural stereotypes will continue to contribute to the perpetuation of under-representation of women in school headship despite the policies and strategies put in place to achieve gender equity.

### **Recommendations**

The achievement of employment equity in primary school headship will require a variety of strategies targeting gender stereotyping by individuals, institutions and policies. There should be more gender sensitive courses in schools. Since stereotypes impede the achievement of gender equity in school headship, there is a need to re-socialize individuals into a new order where gender equality is the norm. The school is one of the primary socializing agents and one of its main roles is to pass on societal norms and values to learners (Haralambos, 1995). The school should therefore offer programmes that assist both boys and girls to develop new orientations about the roles and capabilities of both men and women. Stromquist (1995:249) noted “schools should offer courses for both boys and girls that address sexuality in its social context ... and the social dynamics of sexuality and how they tend to affect women”. Such programmes should assist in modifying preconceptions as to femininity and masculinity that are usually stereotypic. These programmes should be introduced quite early in the school years because behavioural and attitudinal approaches to sexuality are best introduced in early childhood. Children at an early age would realize that they are equal and as they grow up no sex group would feel superior or inferior to the other.

In addition, prospective women heads should be supported as they get socialized into the leadership posts. Support must be given to all who look to school headship as their next career step. Administrators at provincial, district and school levels should be aware that their encouragement and support may be the spark which moves a potential leader to apply for an administrative position. The education system, school communities and the teaching profession must also ensure that all hopeful school heads are adequately supported and have access to professional development opportunities along their career path. In short, if support from colleagues, super ordinates and community members is an integral part of an individual’s progression towards the goal of school headship, then all aspirants must have access to such encouragement.

**Strategies to promote gender equity and building confidence and positive self esteem in women**

Cunanan (1994:6) states that “participating in preparatory administrative training, through informal in-services or through formal university graduate programmes, may increase women’s chances of achieving their desired positions”. Indeed, communities look to universities for leadership. Therefore, the following recommendations for increasing the number of women in school

leadership positions should be considered. These apply to universities and other institutions of higher learning.

- (a) Design and offer graduate programmes that reflect the needs of women leaders, courses that deal with gender-related issues, and provide special programmes on career planning and opportunities for female students to participate in seminars and in-service activity. In other words, female students should be provided with relevant and rigorous administratively preparatory programmes appropriate to the context of today's schools.
- (b) Intensify recruitment of women into educational administration programmes. To complement this intent, the affirmative action policies in place should be monitored more seriously, both in the headship positions and in programmes that prepare women for leadership roles.
- (c) There is a need to establish and strengthen a mentor system within the educational administrative preparatory programmes. Mentoring can increase women's confidence and help them to stay focused on their career goals.
- (d) Difficult as it is, there is a need to win the "old boys' network" where women school heads and women teachers form their own associations. In other words, women need to be allies to each other and develop their own network of relationships.
- (e) Women teachers should be prepared for school leadership by providing them with the following job enrichment experiences designed to increase their skills and competences:
  - their inclusion into leadership activities;
  - their designation as acting administrators; and
  - assigning them tasks that involve solving pressing problems in schools.

### Conclusion

While some of these recommendations may not sound new, they remain appropriate, considering the persistent under-representation of women in school headship in Zimbabwe, despite almost three decades of efforts to achieve gender equity. There is no one answer as to how to increase the number of women school heads. Women need all the opportunities, encouragement and support to allow them access to and success in school administration. After all there is a growing body of literature on women administrators that supports the image of the competent, successful, career-minded female administrator. The question remains: How long will this valuable human resource (women's talent) remain untapped?

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