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Women leaders in community secondary schools in rural Tanzania: Challenges and coping strategies

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Women leaders in community secondary schools in rural Tanzania: Challenges and coping strategies

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Abstract

In Tanzania, many qualified and capable women teachers are not involved in decision making despite the fact that the Tanzania government has affirmed the promotion of women's participation in the decision-making process. Even those few who are in leadership still face obstacles and challenges especially in a rural context. This paper examines the challenges women leaders face and identifies the coping strategies they use to overcome the challenges in Community Secondary Schools (CSSs) in rural Tanzania. The study involved heads of schools, teachers, the Regional Educational Officer (REO) and the District Education Officer (DEO). Data were obtained through interviews and focus group discussions. The findings reveal that women face multi-level challenges with respect to family, society and the education system, most of which arise from early socialisation. Women leaders work in a patriarchal society that does not accept them due to their sex/femininity and there is a lack of trust from their spouses when they execute leadership roles. It was also observed that women leaders face challenges posed by witchcraft and superstition issues in the rural context. In confronting these challenges, women leaders identified cooperation with staff and the community, sharing challenges with experienced leaders, and being creative as useful coping strategies. The study recommends a number of measures for overcoming such challenges at society, organisational and government levels.

Keywords: *Women; challenges; coping strategies; rural community secondary schools; leadership*

Introduction

Although women are observed to be efficient and effective in their professional and leadership roles, the available evidence seems to suggest that only a few are in top leadership positions (Al-Shihabi & Mohammad 2001). Globally, women hold fewer leadership positions than men (Stelter, 2002). Women continue to be alienated from social, economic, and political spheres due to inequitable laws, patriarchy systems, culture and gender stereotypes. The research by the European Commission (2010) reports that:

Today only one out of ten board members of the largest companies listed on the national stock exchange of European Union (EU) member states is a woman and progress has been slow in recent years. The disparity is widest at the very top where

only 3% of such companies have a woman directing the highest decision-making body. (p. 3)

In Europe in 2006, for instance, women comprised about 46% of science, research, and development PhD graduates, but only 18% of senior researchers were women (European Commission, 2010). Similarly, women who were university vice-chancellors in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2012 constituted 14.2%, while men constituted 85.8% (Holt, 2012). In addition, in 2010, only 20% of senior posts in universities in the UK were held by women (Harrison, 2012). Coleman (2002) observed that although the number of women teachers is higher than men in secondary schools in the United States, UK, New Zealand, Germany, Africa, Australia and Central America, their percentage in headship positions is not even half. In most of the developing countries, women hold few leadership roles. In South Africa, for example, women comprised 70% of the teachers, but only 30% of the leaders (Moorosi, 2007). In 2011, in Kenya, 12.8% of heads of primary schools, and 27.3% of heads of secondary schools were headmistresses (Choge, 2015). In Uganda, only 12% of headteachers and deputies in secondary schools in 2005 were women (Sperandio & Kagoda, 2010). Structural obstacles to women's advancement in organisations have their roots in traditional societies. It is a fact that these organisations have been created by and for men (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). The implication is that those who are responsible for making appointments are socialised in patriarchal societies and hence devalue women as leaders.

Tanzania seems to have good affirmative actions and records for promoting women in leadership. For instance, Tanzania was a signatory to gender equality introduced by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. The declaration emphasises that each individual person is equal before the law and has equal rights to access services (United Nations, 1948). This declaration and the 1977 Constitution of Tanzania insist on the equality and rights of every person in all aspects of life (Ministry of Community Development, Women Affairs and Children, 1992). Despite such global declarations and conferences, like the one in Beijing in 1995, which aimed to bring about gender equality, women still hold few leadership roles (Al-Jaradat, 2014). The available evidence suggests that the situation is worse in the educational sector where the number of women who lead secondary schools in Tanzania is still minimal. For example, in 2006, women heads of secondary schools were 12.7% for the whole country (Bandiho, 2009) and in 2013 the percentage increased to about 18% (ADEM, 2013). In primary schools, only 18% of heads of schools were women in 2010 (Hungu, 2010).

The underrepresentation of women in leadership is very visible in Community Secondary Schools (CSSs). Community secondary schools were introduced following educational reform in the 1980s and 1990s (Machumu, 2011). Community Secondary Schools are built by the community and the community is responsible for providing furniture, while the government provides teachers and non-teaching staff, and the government controls and operates the schools. These schools are operated in partnership between the government and the community. The driving force for

introducing these schools was the government policy allowing each ward to build its own school (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2004). Community secondary schools were also introduced because of poverty alienation, and they aimed to give students more opportunity to study in their locality. Most of these schools are located in rural areas where a patriarchal system dominates.

Due to patriarchy in rural areas, women leaders work in a more difficult environment than those who are in urban areas (Oluoch, 2006). Sociocultural norms, socialisation and expectations may have major influences on women leaders and may create obstacles in decision making. Tanzanian society, like other societies in developing countries, still believes that leadership is for men (Muro, 2003). Although women leaders have been observed to possess and utilize leadership skills in both developed and developing countries, they still face many challenges that hinder their performance in leadership positions (Al-Hussein, 2011). For example, negative views concerning women's leadership and their feminine nature generate problems that inhibit women's advancement and growth in relation to leadership (Al-Shaddi, 2010). Coleman (2002) observed that women leaders face the challenge of balancing school and family responsibilities in the UK, which is also observed by Moorosi (2007) in developing countries. In Limpopo province in South Africa, many in the community do not like women to lead schools and many women leaders are ignored due to stereotypes against them (Netshitangani & Msila, 2014). Al-Shaddi (2010) observed that there is often a negative attitude towards women leaders based on their biological nature, and this leads to challenges which block them in many leadership tasks. In Palestine, challenges facing woman leaders in schools are legal, political, social, familial and administrative (Al-Shaddi 2010). In Tanzania, Mollel and Tshabangu (2014) studied women's perceptions and found that women leaders face challenges of negative attitudes within the school and community. Omboko and Oyoo (2011) whose study was on women head teachers in Dar es Salaam came out with similar results. Their findings indicated that women leaders are perceived as unable to lead, and are discriminated against and rejected by their co-workers and community (Mollel & Tshabangu, 2014). This was attributed to the patriarchal system (Mbepera, 2015).

There are only a few studies of women school leaders conducted in Tanzania (Mollel & Tshabangu, 2014; Muro, 2003; Omboko & Oyoo, 2011) and these were situated in urban areas. As such, they did not focus on challenges facing women leaders in rural/remote areas, or on the coping strategies used by women in such schools. This indicates a need to understand how women leaders experience leadership in rural community secondary schools with diverse cultures. This study therefore posed the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges women leaders experience in community secondary schools in rural Tanzania?
2. What are the coping strategies women leaders use in community secondary schools in rural Tanzania?

The findings of this study are significant to Tanzania and the challenges women leaders face. They also provide potential insight into challenges confronting women leaders outside Tanzania who experience related economic, social and cultural issues.

Theoretical perspective: Gender Organisation System (GOS) approach

The Gender Organization System (GOS) approach presents a holistic approach to issues concerning women's leadership (Fagenson, 1990a). This approach argues that an individual and his or her organisation cannot be understood separately from the society (culture) in which he or she works. Women's actions and capacity in leadership are thus influenced by both societal and organisational structure.

It is worth noting that in many societies the appropriate roles and behaviours expected of women relate to taking care of the family (Martin et al., 1983). Gender role expectations and stereotypes, as well as cultural values, impact structures, institutional practice and women's behaviour at work (Martin et al., 1983). Some societies either encourage or discourage women from entering certain careers and developing aspirations relevant to leadership. Moreover, staff and leaders who make recommendations for leadership may be socialised to treat women differently from men. With these attitudes and perceptions at work, there is a higher probability that women in leadership will face challenges that their male counterparts do not. Rowley and Yukongdi (2009) hold that this interaction may lead to the under-representation of women in leadership positions in organisations.

In order to understand inequality in an organisation, it is important to discover how men and women work, how they differ in their experiences, how women are discriminated against in organisations, what challenges and difficulties they face and how the society treats them (Fagenson, 1990b). The GOS approach suggests that women leaders of CSSs in Tanzania are likely to face challenges arising from patriarchy, societal stereotypes and expectations, as well as cultural and organisational practices (Rowley & Yukongdi, 2009).

Methodology

Research approach

A qualitative approach was used in this study because of its strength in collecting in-depth information based on the experiences, beliefs, feelings and behaviour of women in leadership in CSSs (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002). This approach helps to establish a clear picture of the challenges women face in senior leadership positions. In total, this study included 44 participants: seven women heads of schools, one regional education officer (REO), one district education officer (DEO) and 35 women teachers.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants. The REO and DEO, who control education activities in the district and region were selected due to their positions and roles in

education. They were assumed to possess vital information regarding the challenges which face women in being or becoming leaders in rural schools in Tanzania. Women heads of schools were purposively selected based on their experience of the challenges and obstacles faced in aspiring to and being leaders. Women teachers were selected based on their work experience. From seven schools, 35 women teachers with substantial experience under female leadership were selected.

Data collection

This study used interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) which provided freedom for participants to construct information. The interview questions contained the same questions for almost each respondent category in order to obtain valid and consistent findings. This method was used because of its relevance for collecting the views, feelings and perceptions of participants. Cohen et al. (2011) assert that “the interview enables participants to discuss their interpretation of the world in which they live and express how they regard situations from their point of view” (p. 409). Interviews with heads of the schools, the DEO and the REO were conducted in their offices to allow the participants freedom and flexibility. Interviews were conducted in English and Swahili, with each interview lasting approximately one hour.

In Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), questions were constructed in advance so as to provide a broad framework to follow during the discussion. This method was preferred because of its ability to obtain the collective views of respondents and the meanings they give to their experiences (Gill et al., 2008). Each discussion lasted no longer than one and a half hours.

Questions asked during FGDs and interviews were: What are the challenges women heads of schools face? Why are there fewer women leaders in secondary schools than men? Are you satisfied with women leadership? What are the mechanisms women leaders use to cope with the challenges? Do you have any suggestions for challenges women leaders face? How do the school community perceive women leadership?

Data analysis

The process for comprehensive data analysis was adopted from Creswell (2009). The first step, organising and preparing the raw data, involved activities like transcribing the field data, typing notes obtained from the field, and arranging and categorising field data in relation to its source. Reading through the transcribed field data iteratively provided overall information about what was said by the respondents and reflecting on the general meaning of the data was the second step. The third step was to employ a coding procedure, whereby I categorised transcript information using codes. During the fourth stage, codes were used to produce a description and themes. The fifth stage was presenting the description and themes as a qualitative narrative. Creswell (2009) reported that the best means to present qualitative information is to use the story/narrative passage to present the results obtained from the analysis. At this stage, I used narrative text to convey the results of the analysis, as the evidence supporting the key findings.

Findings

Findings are presented in relation to the twin research questions: What are the challenges women leaders face in community secondary schools (CSSs) in rural Tanzania? What are the coping strategies women leaders use in community secondary schools (CSSs) in rural Tanzania?

Challenges women heads of Community Secondary Schools face

1. Deceit in marriage

All seven women heads, the REO and DEO, and teachers in FGDs reported that most spouses of women heads of schools believed that their wives were unfaithful and engaged in love affairs with their bosses whenever they travelled to towns for official duties. This caused them to prohibit their wives from participating in leadership. Such findings imply that most women leaders are mistrusted by their husbands, which frustrates them as they are obliged to prove their innocence. This was reported to discourage other potential and qualified women from participating in leadership. One woman head of school had this to say:

My husband has the mentality that I have sexual relationships with my bosses... he used to ask me, "Why are you the only one who attends meetings every time ... and why not your deputy?". I had a big challenge to prove him wrong ... this discourages potential women to become involved in leadership.

Another woman head of school commented:

When I was posted as the headmistress in this school, the members of the school board did not accept me. Therefore, I decided to form a new school board ... as a result, the members of the former school board told my husband that I had been allowed to form a new board because of my sexual relationships with my bosses. My husband was furious and accused me of using leadership to hide my motives ... this is just an example of the challenges women face as leaders ... and really discourages young ones to become involved in leadership.

The REO and DEO confirmed having received complaints from husbands of women heads of schools, alleging that their wives were unfaithful. The women heads of schools reported having been threatened with divorce by their spouses when they accepted leadership positions far from their residential area. Another marital-related challenge reported by women heads of schools was communication with their husbands for fear of being labelled arrogant as a result of their position at work. They lamented that their husbands, during normal conversation, would consistently remind them not to talk as if they were at school giving orders.

2. Rejection and acceptability of women as leaders

Women heads of schools reported struggling to be accepted by staff and members of the school community. During interviews, all seven heads of schools and the DEO reported that members of school communities preferred men to women heads of schools because the latter were said to be

short-tempered and worse at executing their administrative roles. Teachers in FGDs concurred that they preferred men heads of schools because women heads are short tempered and family roles hinder them from concentrating on their official duties. Teachers also reported that they deliberately asked provocative questions during staff meetings in order to anger women heads and make them appear incapable.

Some staff did not trust the instructions given by women heads without any legal written evidence from higher authority. With regard to that, one woman head of school commented:

Some of my staff show contempt for me when I advise them or give instructions. They say, "Haghhh!! She should not threaten us. She knows nothing" ... there is such disdain for us women leaders! However, I believe in myself and I am confident that I can lead.

Women heads reported facing the challenge of transforming the mentality of members of the school community, who neither accepted nor trusted them. Another woman head of school commented:

I had a meeting with the parents whose children were not performing well in their studies ... during the meeting, one parent told me, "You are just a woman, what can you tell us? We don't accept you! We are wasting our time listening to you." To be honest, I was so annoyed, I told him, "I am not a woman, I am the head of the school" ... some parents send information to the top leadership that they need a man head to replace me ... this discourages women from being involved in leadership.

On a similar note, another woman head commented:

In a school board meeting, the chairperson told me that "women do not think" and he turned his back on me and told other members of the school board, "I told you; this school should not be under woman leadership." With confidence, I told them, "This school can be led by anyone qualified and I was posted to this school by the government and I am qualified and I lead in line with the rules and regulations."

The claims of women heads of schools were supported by the REO and DEO, who reported that because of such challenges, some women heads of schools asked to be transferred to urban areas or would quit the job because they were not accepted by the school community. When women heads were denied a transfer, they ultimately resigned from public service and went to town to become normal teachers in private schools.

3. Challenge to discipline misbehaving students

The findings revealed that women heads of schools face the challenge of disciplining students in CSSs. All participants reported that disciplining students who abuse drugs or misbehave challenges women heads and discourages other women from becoming leaders. Student absenteeism and drug abuse were reported to be a challenge to women teachers on duty and women heads of schools,

as they were constantly threatened with rape, witchcraft, and had stones thrown at them. This was evident from the comment made by a woman teacher:

Disciplining male students who abuse drugs is a big challenge. I witnessed some students telling the woman teacher that they will rape and impregnate her if she continues challenging their behaviour ... I am scared to discipline these students.

Participants reported that the government prohibits the use of corporal punishment in schools and, where necessary to apply, there are procedures and regulations to be followed, and so students increasingly misbehave and disrespect women teachers and heads. This was a greater challenge for women heads than their male counterparts, who were much more likely to be obeyed and respected. In addition, participants observed that the situation was exacerbated by a lack of parental assistance to women leaders in disciplining students. One woman head of school commented:

I once asked parents to come to my office so that we could discuss the disciplining of their children. However, I got no support. Worse still, they almost insulted me for being feminine.

The above quote indicates the extent of negative perceptions of women leaders in rural communities. Participants pointed out that challenges in disciplining students were caused by parents who do not understand the importance of education and have negative views of women leaders. It was revealed that students sometimes sent wrong information to their parents when disciplined by women heads of schools. This was reported to have caused misunderstanding and enmity between parents and heads of schools, eventually discouraging women teachers from aspiring to leadership. One woman teacher commented:

Parents are on the side of their children. They don't support the staffs who discipline students... some parents come to school and shout at the teachers if they discipline their children. This discourages women from aspiring to be leaders.

The extract implies that parents were not in line with teachers in discipline of their children. The REO and DEO also reported that the school heads regularly complained that some parents did not support them in disciplining students.

4. Witchcraft and superstition challenges

Superstition and witchcraft beliefs were reported by all participants as one of the challenges facing women leaders in rural schools. The REO commented on the witchcraft issue, saying:

Some female teachers refuse or hesitate to take up posts for fear of witchcraft. For instance, one female head of school came to our office complaining of witchcraft during the night in that she woke up in the morning with her nightdress torn.

One female head of school added:

It is challenging to work in this district as a woman. You can sleep alone, but when you wake up in the morning, you feel as if you were with a man in bed that night. Male teachers do not experience such things.

The excerpts above present witchcraft as a social phenomenon that inhibits teachers not only from considering leadership posts, but also teaching positions in rural CSSs.

Surviving strategies used by women leaders

1. Women shun leadership

The findings indicate that the majority of women leaders shun leadership for the sake of happiness and peace in their marriages, or avoid the risk of husbands acquiring paramours in their absence. For instance, one woman head of school said:

I have my friend who did not take the leadership post to save her marriage. Her husband was reluctant for her to be a school head far away from home, arguing that she will not be faithful in their marriage.

Another woman leader reported:

I opted to reject the post which was in the remote area but, through counselling and encouragement from various people, I took the post and I am here now, though I cope with the environment but still face some challenge to work in this area.

The extracts indicate that spousal opposition and challenging work environments significantly impact the number of women who participate in decision making in rural community secondary schools.

2. Working hard to be accepted

In order to be accepted, women heads admitted that they had to make greater efforts than their male counterparts. They reported working hard in whatever they were doing and making sure that they involved school community and parents in school activities. One woman head commented, "I have to work hard to be accepted, involve parents in different issues and balance my time effectively."

The women heads reported further that they normally cope with the challenge of balancing multiple roles by budgeting their time effectively and either employing maids or living with close relatives who help them. Furthermore, they reported that maids were not always effective and efficient, which necessitated them performing most of the housework.

3. Encourage open communication among team members

Women heads reported working to have good relationships with staff and community by listening to their grievances and solving their problems where possible. One female head reported:

You have to sit with your staff, pay attention to their complaints and always try your best to come up with creative and innovative explanations and solutions. Never be irritated and lose your temper, give them a chance to air their views.

All women leaders acknowledged the challenge that listening to ideas from subordinates and community members and coming up with mutual solutions poses. They addressed this challenge by not ignoring anyone's opinion. One female head reported, "You cannot ignore anyone's opinion; otherwise he/she will be your enemy and will not respect or listen to you. As a leader, you really need to be impartial towards everyone."

Heads of schools further reported that they try their best to make their subordinates understand that their work is to work as a team, not to control them or rule over them. They reported intervening immediately in conflicts and misunderstandings when they initially arise in order to solve problems.

4. Other strategies

Other strategies identified by women heads of schools included exercising their power by using rules and regulations skilfully, and seeking assistance from more experienced women leaders or top management officials like ward executive officers, the DEO and REO. They also reported using media for networking. One female head commented:

You know, nowadays social media helps a lot to publish issues. For example, the issue of witchcraft was published through social media that teachers in this area are not safe as some members of society practice witchcraft to them... Also, phones are very useful. When we get problem we can call our bosses immediately and get solution.

They also reported discussing with husbands their busy schedule. One female head reported:

I have to discuss with my husband politely about my timetable and all activities which I am doing in the office. This helps him to judge me positively, and even if I travel to the municipal for the meeting, he understands.

In other cases, knowledge of their wives' professional responsibilities is insufficient and some husbands accompany women heads to the municipal as a means of monitoring them.

Discussion

Suspected deceit in marriage

Women leaders in this study face the challenge of proving to their husbands that they are innocent and not involved in love affairs with their bosses when they execute leadership roles. Similar findings show that concerns over lack of faithfulness prompt some men to prohibit their wives from taking up leadership posts far away (Chabaya et al., 2009, p. 242). In the present study, some husbands threatened their wives with divorce if they insisted on taking up leadership posts. This view is supported by Onsongo (2004), who found that some husbands divorced their wives on the suspicion that they were having sexual relationships with their bosses. Some husbands might not allow their wives to participate in leadership obligations because of religious beliefs, jealousy or

cultural beliefs. The current study revealed that women leaders were perceived by their husbands to be too authoritative within their family, too busy with official responsibilities, or too disrespectful. In addition, husbands were advised by some members of the society to marry other women or acquire a paramour when their wife took a leadership post far away. This implies that, rather than being leaders, women in this study are socialised to be humble, not argue against men, stay home, and take care of the family. This is similar to a gendered organisational approach which argues that women in many societies are expected to be a housewife and nothing more (Martin et al., 1983). The possible explanation for this is the patriarchal system, which perpetuates the traditional view that women should support men or husbands and not be involved in challenges that could hinder their work performance in their home.

Unacceptability of women as leaders

This study also found out that women heads of schools were rejected by members of the school community for gender-related reasons. The findings revealed that women heads were assigned a number of stereotypically negative characteristics such as short temperedness and weakness in executing leadership roles which challenge them. These findings are, to some extent, similar to those of Ntawubona (2013) in Uganda, who observed that women who were involved in leadership were perceived as stubborn. Women also face the challenge of proving to the community that they are strong, as they are perceived to be weak and emotional leaders (Korchek & Reese, 2002). This study also observed that due to negative stereotypes, members of the school community indirectly reject women leaders, which leads to women having to work hard to be accepted. These findings are similar to those of other studies, which found that women heads of schools were rejected by the community and staff and isolated from them (Omboko & Oyoo 2011). This suggests that women have the challenge of fighting for acceptance by society by working harder than men in order to perform their leadership. This finding is a clear indication of gender bias in leadership, whereby women are culturally accepted only if they fulfil their housework, family care and non-leadership roles. This therefore suggests that the rejection of women heads of schools by members of the school community discourages women teachers from climbing the leadership ladder as they avoid the challenges women leaders face.

I argue that, although some members of the school community do not accept women heads due to culture and patriarchy, as observed in this study, currently there has been a significant change in how women leaders are perceived in Tanzania, as the number of women involved in leadership is increasing, especially in politics (Okwemba et al., 2011). In 2021, Tanzania has a female president for the first time, the only female president in East Africa since independence. This is a great achievement. Society has started to recognise and accept women leaders because of different affirmative actions and gender equality strategies, especially in politics, which could also change the perception of members of rural CSSs in Tanzania.

Authority to discipline misbehaving students

This study found that male students were reported to threaten women teachers and women heads of schools with rape, witchcraft and violence, such as throwing stones, when they disciplined them. These findings add to previous studies (Cheruto & Kyalo, 2010; Towse et al., 2002), which pointed out that student misbehaviour is a threat and challenge to teachers in developing countries. It also confirms Murithi's (2010) observations that the challenges that face women heads of schools are due to the misbehaviour of children in schools.

In Tanzania in 2019, for example, a total of 72591 secondary students were reported to drop out due to truancy and 2272 students dropped out due to indiscipline (United Republic of Tanzania (URT), 2019). This may be due to the fact that these students are socialised in a society whose culture does not respect and value women. Due to patriarchal practices, even parents, the disciplinary committee and members of school boards sometimes do not cooperate with heads of schools to deal with behaviour problems. This is similar to Murithi's (2010) finding that the school principals were not getting support from parents for disciplining students. Although women leaders observed in this study involved parents in issues concerning the behaviour of their children, the women leaders were still not trusted. This is probably due to the patriarchal system prevailing in the society as women leaders are less accepted by the majority of the community and hence get less support. This concurred with GOS approach that suggests that due to cultural beliefs, women are treated as being submissive to men and they must listen to men (Fagenson, 1990b).

Superstition and witchcraft

Superstition and witchcraft are challenges facing women leaders in rural CSSs. Witchcraft and superstition are big issues in some societies in Tanzania, as these beliefs are strong in the majority of rural communities (Loitare, 2016). This study observed that unexplained events like finding themselves sleeping on the road naked at midnight scared many teachers from working in rural environments. Ibadi (2012) also observed that, in one rural district of Tanzania, superstition and witchcraft scared staff to the extent that they slept in their offices for almost one week.

Superstition and witchcraft are associated with poverty and people's low level of education, which perpetuates these traditions and beliefs. In Tanzania, the Witchcraft Act of 1928 requires people not to practise witchcraft or possess any instruments of witchcraft or threaten others by using witchcraft. Despite this law, which is actually out-dated, some societies in Tanzania still believe in and practise witchcraft. When educated people such as teachers live in such a society, they are subjected to that society's culture and beliefs. This is a contextual finding, as personal views and mind-sets are shaped by society. Belief in witchcraft can have a psychological impact on teachers so that they find it a challenge to work in such an environment, irrespective of whether witchcraft exists or not.

Coping strategies used by women leaders

Leadership is a difficult process. It requires leadership skills and the ability to influence and encourage subordinates to implement organisational goals. This study observed that confident, creative and self-aware women heads used the skills and knowledge they had to exercise their power by following the rules and regulations. The findings of this study are similar to Al-Shaddi (2010) who observed that women stay in leadership positions because of self-awareness and they use the knowledge and authority they possess. This implies that women leaders are good at following the rules and regulations in executing their leadership roles, which fosters fairness, harmony and peace in the organisation.

Women leaders need to involve different stakeholders like parents, students, and teachers in school activities, through conducting meetings frequently and seeking guidance from their bosses (DEO and REO). They also need to encourage subordinates to be creative, emphasize team work, and share challenges with more experienced leaders. These strategies confirm Waweru's (2004) findings that leaders need to conduct meetings and ask advice from their bosses in managing challenges. In such meetings there is a need for transparency and accountability so that everyone is free to air his or her grievances and constructive ideas.

Women leaders are responsible leaders whose skills of socialisation and caring have a great positive impact. They work hard to assist subordinates to find solutions for the difficulties they face in accomplishing school objectives and co-operate with community members (Al-Jaradat, 2014; Al-Shaddi, 2010). Supporting others, listening to community problems, and adopting a transformative leadership style are necessary to gain community acceptance (Coleman, 2002; Valerio 2009). This study found that women in Tanzania have to use extra energy in their leadership to be accepted by the community. In rural Tanzania, the majority of the members of the community are not aware of the concept of gender equality, as gender equality sensitizations are mostly undertaken in urban areas. There is much work to be done in sensitizing rural communities to gender equality.

Due to culture and the patriarchal system, there are few women in leadership as some women either decline to take up the post or step down from leadership in order to secure their marriages. This result is consistent with Chisikwa (2010) in Kenya who found that women often reject posts to favour their marriages. The hegemonic culture in many societies does not value women and socialises them to be housewives. This results in many women being less confident than men, seeing themselves as listeners, and valuing their marriage over their career.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study sought to identify the challenges women leaders face in rural community secondary schools and the coping strategies that they use. The findings indicate that most of the challenges facing women leaders are caused by a patriarchal culture and education system.

That is, culture and social beliefs, like witchcraft, act as a deterrent to women accepting rural posts. Society has low expectations of women, which influences the minds of those who practise gender bias and undervalue women. Women heads in this study were less trusted by husbands who required proof of their innocence in carrying out leadership duties. Lack of staff, school board and parent support, together with student threats of rape impacted their ability and willingness to discipline students. Poverty and lack of exposure to new ideas reinforce cultural beliefs like witchcraft which frighten women in rural schools.

Despite the challenges they face in leadership positions, women heads try their best to be accepted and develop a number of coping strategies. They involve their subordinates and communities in decision making, and are innovative and creative in solving problems on professional and personal front. Open communication is critical in gaining the trust of husbands, colleagues and the school community alike.

The findings of this study support the gender system theory that society is a root cause for gender inequalities in organisations and the community in general. There is a need to deeply examine and understand the role of women teachers and leaders, and the problems and challenges that impact their participation in family, educational institutions and society. Uprooting hegemonic culture requires collective effort and measures by Non-Government Organisations, as well as the government and society at large.

It is my hope that the findings of this study could be used by decision makers in Tanzania to provide different programmes to sensitise the community and improve the posts of women leaders in community secondary schools. Sensitisation programmes should be embedded in the education curriculum so that children can develop a sense of gender equality during their childhood and acknowledge the importance of women in leadership. The government should review the outdated Witchcraft Act and educate rural communities about gender equality through radio, television, village meetings, and seminars or workshops. Joint collaborations and team work among heads of schools, staffs, parents, and school communities, could assist in promoting sustainable gender equality for the benefit of all.

Women leaders should be supported when they encounter challenges. The government should impose student behaviour and support guidelines that include disciplinary measures for student misbehaviour. Training teachers for leadership and helping them to develop the skills needed to overcome challenges before appointing them to leadership posts is one way of attaining equality for women as leaders.

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