EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN LEADERS IN SELECTED HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

According to a study by Ward & Eddie (2013), professional women hold themselves back in their careers by failing to grab opportunities. Women in academe perceive academic progress, promotion and leadership as advanced positions that would bar them from having time with their families as well as life beyond work. A study by Hall (1993) questions whether professional women have appropriate orientation to fulfil the masculine role of being a leader. Hence Cooper (1992) in his study confirms that males tend to doubt the ability of women to successfully hold senior positions. Some women anticipate some challenges in leadership positions and as a result, they dread taking up these positions. Goal no.3 of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals compels countries to promote gender equity and to empower women (UN 2010).This study seeks to find out the lived experiences of women leaders in selected higher education institutions in Zimbabwe. A qualitative research design will be performed since the researchers need to tape the experiences of women leaders in the Higher Education arena: A purposive sample of eight women leaders will be drawn from a population of women leaders from the selected higher education institutions. The findings would help to highlight corrective measures which can be taken to encourage and promote women leaders in Higher Education settings. More so other areas of research may emerge that would enhance development of women leaders in the field of Higher Education.

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Introductionl/Background of the study

Education is a worldwide tool that equips societies with skills to enable them to live harmoniously. According to Hall (1993), being a successful leader in education means having values about the central purpose of the enterprise that is to equip the society with valuable skills. In addition the constructivist leadership enables members of the educational community to solve educational problems by constructing meanings to solve societal problems at a specific moment and time. A study by Ward and Eddy (2013) revealed that although the career of teaching tends to be dominated by women there is under representation of women in leadership positions. Their male counterparts see women as inferior as they seem to have negative attitudes (Coleman, 2001). Males tend to doubt the ability of women to successfully hold senior positions. It is against this background that the researchers seek to find out the experiences of women leaders in selected higher education Institutions.

Literature Review

In this study the literature review will focus on women and leadership, challenges encountered by women leaders, implications of the challenges/ experiences of woman leaders, creating an environment for promoting women leaders in Higher Education.

Women and leadership

In the field of education leadership and management are inseparable. A Lecturer, Tutor or a Classroom Practioner is a leader or manager in his/her own territory of operation. So ideally all managers are leaders and all leaders are managers. Thus women in education are leaders in one way or the other. A study by Curry ( ) revealed that women struggle to construct themselves as leaders to cope with pressures of vulnerability, self- mastery let alone male dominance. Ward and Eddy (2013) alludes that women don't want to take up leadership positions because they feel these positions may affect their future choices. Women also dread taking promotions and leadership positions for they tend to impinge in their family lives. Women can opt to take various stances in such scenarios. Firstly some professional women in education may choose to remain associate professors or faculty members and not interested in formal leadership or administrative

roles. Secondly others choose to be part-time or non-tenure positions to avoid potential conflicts between academic work and parenthood. Thirdly middle level administrators decide to stay put due to lack of internal opportunity or desire to avoid spotlight and constant public scrutiny placed on top campus leaders. In addition many mid-career women opt to forgo promotion and leadership in anticipation in anticipation of messy politics leadership positions or some sexist cultures associated with these ventures. Furthermore a study by Ogumtoyimbo cites deeply rooted attitudes towards women in universities when it comes to appointing them to senior positions.(diverseeducation.cm/article/63366) Men seem to resist the idea of women joining their executive ranks. There are still gender inequality gaps in higher education institutions due to traditional norms such as the belief that management should be male-dominated.

Challenges encountered by woman leaders

Women leaders encounter high level criticisms. Many men seem resistant to the idea of women joining their executive ranks (Organtoimbo, 2014). Men are seen to be natural leaders while women are considered to be caring/teaching roles. Some women managers or leaders end up in senior positions more by accident than conscious and deliberate career choice (diverseeducation.com/article 63366). Female leaders in education continue to face barriers that include discrimination, subbotage and different expectations of men and women. In addition, unequal power relations act against women's opportunities for promotions. This contributes to women's reluctance to apply for senior positions. Organtoimbo (2014) also noted that sometimes colleagues and subordinates underestimate some leaders. Hall (1993) sees women as victims as they fail to negotiate successful organisational barriers to the advancement. There are multiple reasons that bar women to attain leadership positions. These reasons include the social and institutional expectations that women cannot lead. A study by Ward and Eddy (2013) revealed that work pressure, favouritism, discrimination and social obligations are some of the biggest challenges faced by women leaders. Lack of models, mentors and leadership training are also contributory factors. In addition, the need for family responsibilities disturbs the career development path for women leaders. Women continue to be perceived as being inferior and negative and unhelpful attitudes are still entrenched in the minds of men.

Qualities of some types of women leaders

A study by Hall (1993) revealed that leaders in education should have particular leadership values. Heads are expected to be tough, aggressive, competitive, directive and autocratic. Women by nature tend to be somehow soft. As a result, women fear that being a manager means behaving in an unfamiliar or uncomfortable way that includes having undesirable power of others. This study seeks to unearth the experiences of women leaders in selected high education institutions in Zimbabwe. The table below indicates some characteristics of educational leaders.

Technical Leadership	Practical Leadership
- sets unambiguous short term goals	- has an overriding concern for welfare goals of staff and' clients
- pre-selects strategies	- encourages staff to peruse broad professional development
- structures in sequences implementation strategies	- involves staff in decision making
- anticipates problems & prepares other strategies	- facilitate the use of deliberative processes of decision making
- as far as possible supplies answers to staff questions	- shares leadership roles amongst staff
- is well prepared for staff meetings	- encourages staff to adopt an experimental approach to their work
- runs orderly staff meetings	- arranges for share reflection on analysis of the outcomes of actions
- diffuses conflicts & redirects dissatisfaction	

- identifies areas of staff weakness	
- arranges staff training opportunities for development of skills	
- rewards staff successes	

Source: Based an Grant, 1993, *pages 168-70.*

Ways of overcoming challenges faced by women leaders

There is need for policies, structural, cultural and attitudinal changes to ensure equal opportunities in the educational sector. There are still gender inequality gaps in Higher Education Institutions due to traditional norms such as the conviction that management should be male dominated (mg.co.za/article2014·08/12). Women need support and encouragement to overcome these barriers. Systematic institutional innovation should focus on professional development of women.

Mentoring is recognised as being of great importance in career development. Current leaders saving as mentors should provide guidance and tips for advancing women in positions of leadership. Senior management should establish both formal and informal mentoring for women staff. Some gender mentoring avoids problems that are encountered in cross-gender mentoring and provide valuable role models. Female role models can change the attitudes of both men and women (Davidson and Cooper,1992:87). More women would seek advanced positions if they saw models and norms of a balanced lifestyle, work-family integration and institutional recognition. Colleges need to run leadership development programs. On the whole institutions need to create environments that encourage and support women who want to integrate family life and personal goals relating to leadership and advancement.

Problem Statement

What are the experiences of women leaders in selected Higher Education Institutions?

Objectives of the study

To fmd out experiences of women leaders in selected Higher Education institutions

To identify the challenges encountered by the women leaders

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To establish how these challenges can be mitigated

Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of women leaders in selected Higher Education Institutions?

2. What are the implications of these experiences?

3. What challenges do women leaders encounter?

4. How can the challenges be mitigated?

Methodology

A qualitative approach was employed and a case study method was used. The case study design enabled the researchers to focus on appropriate informants to illicit the required data. Semi-structured interviews focused on specific informants and in this case, women leaders in Higher Education sector. A purposive sampling of eight women in leadership positions was used. The targeted population ranges from Deans, Directors Chairpersons and Managers. Semi-structured interviews were carried out at specific times and places.

Data analysis

The aim of data analysis was to find answers to the research questions. In this study the data was analysed based on specified themes or categories. A summary of the findings was given basing it on the set themes. The analysis highlighted the experiences of the women leaders. New perspectives on the phenomena were reflected.

Conclusions

This study set out to analyse women's experiences in leadership positions. Looking at the four pillars of leadership namely aspire, plan, inspire and execute, the participants reflected various notions about each pillar basing on their experiences. Various degrees of the pillars were highlighted and this would help the institutions to strategise ways and means of promoting women leadership. Zimbabwean women are seen to be making tremendous contributions towards the development of the country be it in business or education. Women are the heartbeat of the nation. They strive for unity and as a result they are unifiers in most areas of development let alone education. Most women avoid promotion and leadership due

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to messy politics associated with cultural connotations that women cannot lead as well as challenges of reconciling work life and family life. As a result some women prefer to be just faculty members, associate professors, part-time workers, or even to remain non-tenured to avoid conflicts between academic work and parenthood. The study indicated developmental needs of women leaders and institutions can make strategies to encourage women to take up leadership positions.

Recommendations

There are various steps which could be taken by Higher Education Institutions to encourage women to take up leadership positions:

Institutions should create environments that are conducive to the extent that women would want to take up leadership positions. Institutional policies should amplify the need to engage women in all levels of promotion process.
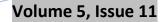
Current leaders should serve as mentors to aspiring women leaders. In addition these leaders should be mindful of the examples they set. A cross-mentoring approach would assist in driving away fears that women have in taking up leadership positions.

Men need awareness programmes to be able to accommodate women leaders in their male dominated domain.

Institutions should run leadership development programmes regularly to keep abreast of the current trends.

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