

Community-Based Participatory Research in Education: Empowering Women School Leaders in KwaZulu-Natal



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ABSTRACT

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) has emerged as a robust methodology to foster collaboration and empowerment in educational contexts. This paper explores the application of CBPR in the context of education, focusing specifically on its role in empowering women school leaders in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Through a qualitative research approach, this study was conducted in close collaboration with women school leaders and with community stakeholders and schools' active and integral participation. The findings of this study underscore the importance of community-based participatory approaches in empowering women school leaders and advancing gender equity in educational leadership in KwaZulu-Natal. The key findings highlight the following themes: gendered power dynamics in educational leadership, the impact of CBPR on women's empowerment, identification of empowerment strategies, collective action and community support, and the potential for transformative change. These findings provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and community stakeholders, serving as a guide for promoting inclusive and equitable educational practices.

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INTRODUCTION

The global underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, particularly within the educational sector, remains a significant issue, despite ongoing efforts to promote gender equity. In South Africa, while legislative frameworks and policies have been introduced to address gender disparities, women, especially in KwaZulu-Natal, continue to encounter structural and socio-cultural barriers that hinder their progression to leadership positions in education.¹ Research on women in educational leadership indicates that factors such as patriarchal attitudes, gender biases, and historical underrepresentation contribute to the marginalization of women, restricting their opportunities for advancement in schools and educational institutions.² These challenges are particularly pronounced in rural and disadvantaged regions, where cultural norms often enforce gendered expectations that limit women's roles within both the family and

¹ Dube, Misheck. "Poverty, gender and primary education: Experiences of learners in Elandskop, KwaZulu Natal." *Global Journal of Health Science* 11, no. 5 (2019): 67-78

² Anrusha Bhana, "Challenges Impeding Women into Leadership Roles in a Student-Led Organization at a South African Higher Education Institution," *LLC "Consulting Publishing Company" Business Perspectives* 19, no. 4 (2021): 508-17; Nikiwe Zuma, Vijay Hamlall, and Nirmala Dorasamy, "'The Zulu Way': Experiences and Practices of Black Female Teachers: A Case Study of a Rural Secondary School in Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa," *Gender and Behaviour* 20, no. 2 (2022): 19463-71.

society at large.³ As a result, although many female educators serve as role models for students, their leadership potential remains untapped due to systemic barriers and societal expectations.⁴ In response to this issue, there has been a growing recognition of the need to empower women leaders in education by addressing the challenges they face and involving them in the process of identifying the strategies for empowerment. This shift has led to a rising interest in participatory research methodologies that involve communities directly in research processes. One such methodology is Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), which positions community members as active partners at all stages of the research process, from identifying research questions to disseminating findings and implementing solutions.⁵ CBPR has emerged as a powerful tool for promoting social justice and equity, as it focuses on collaboration, shared decision-making, and the co-creation of knowledge. By involving women school leaders as equal partners in the research process, CBPR fosters a sense of agency and ownership, empowering participants to participate in transformative change.⁶

The Women in Leadership and Management (WiLM) research project, initiated by the Women in Research (WiR) programme at the University of South Africa, seeks to address these gaps by collaborating with women school leaders in KwaZulu-Natal. This project has formed partnerships with 40 women managers, including school principals, deputy principals, departmental heads, and managers from the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector. These partnerships aim to explore the challenges faced by women in education leadership roles, identify policies and strategies that can facilitate their empowerment. Moreover, propose practical solutions to promote gender equity in educational leadership. The WiLM research project is grounded in CBPR principles, with a focus on developing locally relevant solutions that reflect the unique challenges and needs of women leaders in the region.⁷ Through this collaboration, the study seeks to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on gender equity in education and provide actionable recommendations for stakeholders committed to fostering inclusive and equitable educational leadership.⁸ The subsequent sections include a literature review, an explanation of the theoretical framework, methodology, presentation of the findings, discussion of the results, implications for practice, and the conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gendered Power Dynamics in Educational Leadership

The underrepresentation of women in educational leadership roles is an issue closely linked to gendered power dynamics that have been deeply ingrained in educational systems globally, and especially in South Africa. Research on women's leadership within the education sector indicates that these dynamics are multifaceted, encompassing both institutional and cultural barriers that affect women's progression into leadership positions.⁹ In particular, gendered power structures tend to elevate male leadership while marginalizing female leadership, often framing leadership as a male-dominated trait.¹⁰ These power imbalances are exacerbated in regions like KwaZulu-Natal, where traditional gender roles dictate that women's roles are largely confined to the domestic sphere, leaving little room for participation in

³ Ntombikayise Nkosi, "A Sociocultural Position of Women in Leadership: Reflections from Four School Principals' Lived Vulnerable Experiences," *Journal of Culture and Values in Education* 7, no. 4 (2024): 172–89; Zaheer Alli, "The Role of Female Principals as Transformational Leaders to Improve Schools in the UMgungundlovu District, KwaZulu-Natal" (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2020).

⁴ Melissa S Kearney and Phillip B Levine, "Role Models, Mentors, and Media Influences," *The Future of Children* 30, no.1(2020):83–106.

⁵ Maria V Suurna and Andreas Leibbrandt, "Underrepresented Women Leaders: Lasting Impact of Gender Homophily in Surgical Faculty Networks," *The Laryngoscope* 132, no. 1 (2022): 20–25.

⁶ Lynn R Offermann and Kira Foley, "Is There a Female Leadership Advantage?," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Business and Management*, 2020.

⁷ André Meyer, Dirk Richter, and Viola Hartung-Beck, "The Relationship between Principal Leadership and Teacher Collaboration: Investigating the Mediating Effect of Teachers' Collective Efficacy," *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 50, no. 4 (2022): 593–612.

⁸ Lungisani Nkomo, Musawenkosi D Saurombe, and Eugene T Maziriri, "Female Representation in Technical Roles within the Performing Arts Industry," in *Women's Empowerment for a Sustainable Future: Transcultural and Positive Psychology Perspectives* (Springer, 2023), 401–17.

⁹ Nokwanda Jali, Sachin Suknunan, and Anrusha Bhana, "Challenges Impeding Women into Leadership Roles in a Student-Led Organization at a South African Higher Education Institution," *Problems and Perspectives in Management* 19, no. 4 (2021): 508; Nkosi, "A Sociocultural Position of Women in Leadership: Reflections from Four School Principals' Lived Vulnerable Experiences."

¹⁰ Offermann and Foley, "Is There a Female Leadership Advantage?"; Sicelo Vincent Msibi, "Gender-Based Challenges Faced by Women in Leadership: A Case Study of One Government Department in KwaZulu-Natal" (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2020).

leadership roles in educational institutions.¹¹ Moreover, societal perceptions of women's leadership abilities often influence the expectations placed upon women in leadership positions. For example, women leaders may be expected to adopt more nurturing and collaborative leadership styles, which, while effective, are often undervalued or overlooked compared to more hierarchical and authoritative leadership styles often associated with male leaders.¹² These gendered power dynamics contribute to the challenge of women assuming leadership roles in schools and limit their ability to exercise authority effectively within the educational system. By actively addressing and analysing these gendered power dynamics, CBPR can serve as an essential tool to uncover the ways in which power structures influence the career trajectories of women in educational leadership.¹³

Impact of CBPR on Women's Empowerment

CBPR has emerged as an empowering methodology, particularly in contexts where marginalised groups, such as women, need their voices heard in research and decision-making processes.¹⁴ The literature demonstrates that CBPR fosters empowerment by allowing women to actively participate in creating knowledge that directly affects their lives.¹⁵ CBPR is particularly useful in educational settings because it promotes shared decision-making, equal participation, and collaborative solutions. When women are involved in participatory research processes, they gain a sense of ownership and agency, which can translate into greater self-efficacy and confidence in their leadership roles.¹⁶ Moreover, studies have shown that CBPR can be a catalyst for personal and professional development, particularly for women who are traditionally marginalised in leadership positions. By directly engaging in the research process, women are empowered to articulate their experiences and challenges. They are also provided with opportunities to co-create strategies for their empowerment.¹⁷ This aligns with the findings of the WiLM research project, which has provided a platform for school women leaders to explore the structural and socio-cultural barriers that hinder their progression into leadership roles and to develop strategies for overcoming these challenges.¹⁸

Identification of Empowerment Strategies

Women in educational leadership positions often face unique challenges related to gender discrimination, lack of mentorship, and limited access to professional development opportunities. These challenges are often compounded by cultural expectations that position women as subordinates to male leaders.¹⁹ In response, the literature advocates for several empowerment strategies, including mentoring programs, professional development workshops, and networking opportunities that can improve women's leadership capabilities.²⁰ Mentorship, in particular, has been identified as a critical empowerment strategy. Female mentors provide guidance and emotional support, moreover, serve as role models, helping others navigate the complex power dynamics of educational leadership.²¹ Furthermore, creating institutional support networks for women in leadership roles can help break down the social and cultural barriers that often hinder their success. These networks create spaces where women can share resources, experiences and strategies for overcoming challenges. The WiLM research project also emphasises the importance of collective action, where women leaders collaborate with community members and

¹¹ Zuma, Hamlall, and Dorasamy, "'The Zulu Way': Experiences and Practices of Black Female Teachers: A Case Study of a Rural Secondary School in Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa."

¹² Kearney and Levine, "Role Models, Mentors, and Media Influences."

¹³ Suurna and Leibbrandt, "Underrepresented Women Leaders: Lasting Impact of Gender Homophily in Surgical Faculty Networks."

¹⁴ Laura Lee et al., "Journey to Hope, Self-Expression and Community Engagement: Youth-Led Arts-Based Participatory Action Research," *Children and Youth Services Review* 109 (2020): 104581.

¹⁵ Suurna and Leibbrandt, "Underrepresented Women Leaders: Lasting Impact of Gender Homophily in Surgical Faculty Networks."

¹⁶ Meyer, Richter, and Hartung-Beck, "The Relationship between Principal Leadership and Teacher Collaboration: Investigating the Mediating Effect of Teachers' Collective Efficacy."

¹⁷ Suurna and Leibbrandt, "Underrepresented Women Leaders: Lasting Impact of Gender Homophily in Surgical Faculty Networks."

¹⁸ Zuma, Hamlall, and Dorasamy, "'The Zulu Way': Experiences and Practices of Black Female Teachers: A Case Study of a Rural Secondary School in Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa."

¹⁹ Misheck Dube, "Poverty, Gender and Primary Education: Experiences of Learners in Elandskop, KwaZulu Natal," *Global Journal of Health Science* 11, no. 5 (2019): 67–78.

²⁰ Alli, "The Role of Female Principals as Transformational Leaders to Improve Schools in the UMgungundlovu District, KwaZulu-Natal."

²¹ Kearney and Levine, "Role Models, Mentors, and Media Influences."

policymakers to advocate for gender-sensitive policies and practices that promote gender equity in education.²²

Potential for Transformative Change

The ultimate goal of empowering women in educational leadership is to foster transformative change that impacts women and the broader educational system. Suurna and Leibbrandt allude that when women are empowered to take on leadership roles, they improve their own professional lives but also contribute to the overall improvement of educational outcomes.²³ In particular, women bring a unique perspective to leadership that can influence policies, curricula, and the overall culture of educational institutions. Women leaders tend to be more focused on inclusive practices, collaboration, and student-centered approaches, which have been shown to improve learning outcomes.²⁴ Furthermore, when women are in leadership positions, they can challenge gender stereotypes and inspire future generations of women to aspire to leadership roles. This, in turn, creates a cycle of empowerment that can lead to broader societal change. The potential for transformative change is especially evident when CBPR is employed. By involving community members in the research and decision-making process, CBPR not only empowers individual women but also creates opportunities for systemic change within the educational system.²⁵ For example, the WiLM research project has sought to address the deep-rooted gendered power dynamics that exists within schools in KwaZulu-Natal. By working with women school leaders to identify and implement strategies for empowerment, the project aims to create a lasting impact on both the participants and their school community.²⁶ The potential for transformative change is thus amplified when women are given the tools and support to become effective leaders, driving both personal and institutional change in the process.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is underpinned by two theories: Feminist theory and Critical Pedagogy. Feminist theory by Mary Wollstonecraft provides a critical lens through which to analyse power dynamics, social inequalities, and gender issues within educational contexts.²⁷ It emphasises the importance of recognising and challenging patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender biases and discrimination. Feminist theories analyse women's experiences of gender subordination, the roots of women's oppression, and how gender inequality is perpetuated, and offer different remedies for gender.²⁸ It highlights the systemic barriers and patriarchal structures that contribute to women's underrepresentation in leadership positions. Through collective organising, feminism works towards eradicating gender inequalities and associated violence arising from poverty, lack of opportunity and recognition, and sexual violence, which positions women's bodies at considerable risk globally, including at work and in organisations.²⁹ The feminist theory is applied in this study to uncover and address the unique challenges women face in leadership positions within educational institutions, shedding light on the systemic barriers they encounter and advocating for gender equity and inclusivity. Within the research context, feminist theory helps illuminate the experiences of women school leaders in KwaZulu-Natal, including the challenges they face and the strategies they employ to navigate gendered power dynamics. Furthermore, critical pedagogy challenges dominant power structures and fosters critical consciousness among marginalised groups.³⁰ It advocates participatory approaches to education that empower individuals to critically analyse and transform oppressive systems.

²² Nkomo, Saurombe, and Maziriri, "Female Representation in Technical Roles within the Performing Arts Industry."

²³ Suurna and Leibbrandt, "Underrepresented Women Leaders: Lasting Impact of Gender Homophily in Surgical Faculty Networks."

²⁴ M Asher Lawson et al., "Hiring Women into Senior Leadership Positions Is Associated with a Reduction in Gender Stereotypes in Organizational Language," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 119, no. 9 (2022): e2026443119.

²⁵ Lee et al., "Journey to Hope, Self-Expression and Community Engagement: Youth-Led Arts-Based Participatory Action Research."

²⁶ Zuma, Hamlall, and Dorasamy, "'The Zulu Way': Experiences and Practices of Black Female Teachers: A Case Study of a Rural Secondary School in Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa."

²⁷ Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, 5th ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1989).

²⁸ Abeda Sultana, "Patriarchy and Women's Subordination: A Theoretical Analysis," *Arts Faculty Journal*, 2010, 1–18.

²⁹ Marianna Fotaki and Alison Pullen, "Feminist Theories and Activist Practices in Organization Studies," *Organization Studies* 45, no. 4 (2024): 593–616.

³⁰ Paulo Freire, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," in *Toward a Sociology of Education* (New York: Continuum, 2020), 374–86.

Critical pedagogy focuses on questioning and challenging dominant ideologies and structures to promote social justice and empowerment. According to Burbules & Berk critical pedagogy is concerned with the influences of educational knowledge and cultural formations.³¹ This perpetuates an unjust status quo; fostering a critical capacity in citizens is a way of enabling them to resist such power effects. Critical Pedagogues take sides on behalf of groups disenfranchised from social, economic, and political possibilities. In the context of this study, critical pedagogy serves as a framework for examining the power dynamics within educational leadership and advocating for transformative change. A critical pedagogical approach was adopted to engage participants in critical dialogue, empower them to challenge existing power structures, and work towards creating more equitable and inclusive educational environments. Critical pedagogy informs the CBPR approach in the research context by promoting collaboration, dialogue, and collective action among women school leaders and community stakeholders. It encourages participants to reflect on gender inequities and co-create strategies for empowerment critically. Using CBPR emphasises the active participation of community members in all stages of the research process, from problem identification to action planning and implementation.³² It seeks to generate meaningful and relevant knowledge for the community, leading to transformative change. Through critical pedagogy, this study seeks to challenge dominant ideologies and structures that perpetuate gender inequities in educational leadership. It encourages critical reflection, dialogue, and action among participants, empowering them to advocate for transformative change. When engaging in participatory research methods guided by critical pedagogy, women school leaders and community stakeholders become active agents in identifying and addressing systemic barriers, ultimately leading to more inclusive and empowering educational environments. CBPR, therefore, serves as the foundational framework for the research paper, guiding the CBPR approach to empowering women school leaders in KwaZulu-Natal. It promotes collaboration, dialogue, and shared decision-making among researchers, women school leaders, and community stakeholders, leading to actionable outcomes that address gender inequities in educational leadership. Feminist theory and critical pedagogy provide a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing the complex issues surrounding gender equity in educational leadership. They offer tools for analysis, reflection, and action, guiding the research process towards meaningful insights and tangible outcomes aimed at promoting gender justice and empowerment within educational institutions.

As a result, the integration of feminist theory, critical pedagogy, and CBPR provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing gender dynamics and power relations within educational institutions. Moreover, it provides a robust framework for researching and addressing the challenges women school leaders face in KwaZulu-Natal. This approach highlights the systemic issues and power dynamics at play and promotes empowerment, collaboration, and transformative change within the community.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences, perceptions, and perspectives of women school leaders participating in CBPR initiatives.³³ This approach provided in-depth insights into their experiences within a specific geographical context, enhancing the relevance and applicability of the findings. This study adopts a qualitative research design, exploring the lived experiences, perceptions, and perspectives of women school leaders participating in CBPR initiatives. According to Creswell a qualitative study is an investigation process by which the researcher gradually makes sense of social phenomena by contrasting, comparing, replicating, cataloguing, and classifying the object under study.³⁴ Purposive sampling was used to select nineteen principals, six deputy principals and five departmental heads based on their involvement in CBPR initiatives (WILM) to empower women

³¹ Nicholas C Burbules and Rupert Berk, "Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy: Relations, Differences, and Limits," *Critical Theories in Education: Changing Terrains of Knowledge and Politics*, 1999, 45–65.

³² Jane B Hopkinson, David N M Wright, and Jessica L Corner, "Seeking New Methodology for Palliative Care Research: Challenging Assumptions about Studying People Who Are Approaching the End of Life," *Palliative Medicine* 19, no. 7 (2005): 532–37.

³³ Hopkinson, Wright, and Corner, "Seeking New Methodology for Palliative Care Research: Challenging Assumptions about Studying People Who Are Approaching the End of Life."

³⁴ John Creswell and Timothy Guetterman, *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research, 6th Edition*, 2018.

school leaders in KwaZulu-Natal. Before data collection, we obtained permission from the circuit manager as the gatekeeper and ethical clearance from our institution. Participants were provided with information about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits, and their voluntary participation was obtained through informed consent. Participants' confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by using pseudonyms and securely storing and anonymising data (P- principal, DP -deputy principal, H -Departmental Head). The participants were asked to sign a consent form outlining the study's rules and procedures.

Focus group discussions were used to collect data from participants. De Vos et al. describe a focus group interview as a means of better understanding how people feel or think about an issue.³⁵ McMillan and Schumacher define interviews as open responses to obtain participants' meanings and how they make sense of essential events in their lives.³⁶ These discussions provided a broader perspective on the impact of CBPR on women's leadership empowerment. The validity and reliability was conducted, through which participants were allowed to review and validate the findings to ensure accuracy and credibility.³⁷ Data from one focus group discussion were analysed using inductive thematic analysis following the measures suggested by Braun and Clarke.³⁸ They propose six phases for categorising research data according to themes. The following phases were undertaken: familiarising ourselves with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.³⁹ These data analysis measures allowed the researchers to develop themes that aided in answering the posed research question in the current study.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The findings reveal important insights into the experiences of women school leaders and the strategies for empowerment within the context of CBPR. The following key themes emerged from the data analysis:

Theme 1: Gendered power dynamics in educational leadership

Women school leaders in KwaZulu-Natal navigate a landscape characterised by entrenched gendered power dynamics and patriarchal structures within educational institutions. Participants reported facing challenges related to gender bias, discrimination, and stereotyping in their roles as school leaders. This was revealed in their words:

Patriarchy starts ... at home, in the community, our society too. At work, in churches, there is this big problem that you also come to ... to find even at work. H4

We are entrenched in bias and cultural norms that favour male leadership. P7

They would bypass me and go to the principal as a man.... there are things that they will not accept from me. DP1

They preferred a male in the position of a DP, not me. DP 2

You are just an SMT on paper, but you are not involved in any kind of decision-making of the school. H1

Women school leaders in KwaZulu-Natal face significant challenges due to deep-rooted gender biases and patriarchal norms within educational institutions. They find their roles limited to nominal positions without involvement in decision-making processes. This practice perpetuates experiences of discrimination and stereotyping, where their authority is frequently undermined. This systemic preference for male leadership impacts women's professional lives and leadership opportunities, as they are often bypassed or overlooked for significant roles and decisions. Despite holding official titles, their contributions and decisions are frequently disregarded, as highlighted by the participant who noted that being an SMT (School Management Team member) is merely on paper and does not translate into real influence and participation in school governance.

³⁵ A. S. De Vos et al., *Research at Grass Roots: For the Social Sciences and Human Service Professions* (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 2011).

³⁶ James H. McMillan and Sally Schumacher, *Research in Education: Evidence-Based Inquiry* (Pearson, 2010).

³⁷ Linda Birt et al., "Member Checking: A Tool to Enhance Trustworthiness or Merely a Nod to Validation?," *Qualitative Health Research* 26, no. 13 (2016): 1802–11.

³⁸ Gareth Terry et al., "Thematic Analysis," *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology* 2, no. 17–37 (2017): 25.

³⁹ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology" 3, no. 2 (January 1, 2006): 77–101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.

Theme 2: Impact of CBPR on women's empowerment

The CBPR approach facilitated a collaborative and participatory research process, empowering women school leaders to voice their experiences, concerns, and aspirations. Participants expressed a sense of agency and empowerment through their participation in the research process, which enabled them to challenge existing power structures and advocate for gender equity in educational leadership, as they declared:

We need formal platforms to be involved in research and be capacitated with different skills. DP 4

Here it's a safe space and means we can engage about good and bad experiences for our wellbeing. H2

I am on long sick leave and thinking of resigning, the work environment is toxic we need platforms to talk and be heard. P 4

The CBPR approach empowered women school leaders by creating a collaborative environment where they could share their experiences and advocate for gender equity. This participatory method allowed them to express their needs for formal platforms to engage in research and foster a sense of empowerment and well-being. Participants highlighted the necessity of such platforms to address toxic work environments and support their professional and personal growth. Through the CBPR process, women leaders found a supportive community that validated their experiences and provided a safe space for open dialogue. This sense of safety and community was crucial, as it enabled them to discuss both positive and negative aspects of their professional lives. This enhanced their emotional and psychological well-being. Engaging in this discourse without fear of judgment was empowering, allowing them to articulate their struggles and envision solutions collectively.

Moreover, the CBPR approach emphasised the importance of equipping women leaders with the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate the educational landscape. The call for formal platforms where women can participate in research and gain various skills indicates the need for institutional support. This need for capacity building reflects a desire for greater involvement and recognition within their professional spheres. Moreover, challenging the traditional power dynamics that often marginalise their contributions. When advocating for platforms that enable dialogue and support, women leaders seek personal empowerment and strive to create healthier, more inclusive work environments. The CBPR approach, therefore, serves as a catalyst for these leaders to confront and address the systemic issues affecting their professional lives. While reinforcing agency and potential for enacting meaningful change in educational leadership.

Theme 3: Identification of empowerment strategies

Through collaborative discussions and dialogues, participants identified various strategies for empowering women school leaders in KwaZulu-Natal. These strategies include mentorship and networking opportunities, leadership development programs, advocacy for policy change, and the creation of supportive work environments that promote gender equality. Given the challenges posed by entrenched gender biases, these leaders emphasise the importance of ongoing collaboration. Emphasising that it should be between women school leaders, community stakeholders, policymakers, and educational institutions to address systemic barriers and promote inclusive leadership practices. Participants' views illustrate this need for a united effort:

We need workshops on school management policies, team building, and networking is a great, brilliant tool as well. DP4.

We need people who are experts and assist us in making sure that policies are effectively implemented in KZN and ensure a gender-sensitive environment, not what culture dictates. DP5.

Takes us for intensive training courses, where we can be mentored and be trained on legislation that will empower us to effectively manage schools. DP3.

Participants recognised that mentorship and networking are crucial tools for empowering women in leadership roles. These initiatives provide a platform for sharing experiences, gaining insights, and building professional relationships that can support career advancement. The call for workshops on

school management policies and team-building activities highlights the need for continuous professional development and peer support systems. Moreover, there is an apparent demand for expert assistance in implementing policies effectively. It is vital to ensure that policies are gender-sensitive and not merely reflective of traditional cultural norms. This approach would help create a more equitable environment where women leaders can thrive. The need for policy advocacy was highlighted by the emphasis on expert participation in navigating and enforcing these policies within the educational landscape of KwaZulu-Natal. Intensive training courses were also identified as essential for empowering women leaders. This training would give them the knowledge and skills necessary to manage schools effectively. Mentorship during these training programs can further support their professional growth by offering guidance and fostering confidence in their leadership capabilities. These strategies collectively aim to create supportive work environments that promote gender equality. The participants are convinced that by addressing the systemic challenges women face, including cultural biases and the lack of professional support, these initiatives can pave the way for a more inclusive and empowering leadership structure within schools. Participants' voices reveal a strong desire for structured and sustained support mechanisms to enhance their leadership roles. And advocate for meaningful policy changes that foster gender equity in educational leadership.

Theme 4: Collective action and community support

Participants emphasised the importance of collective action and community support in advancing gender equity in educational leadership. They highlighted the need for ongoing collaboration between women school leaders and community stakeholders to address systemic barriers and promote inclusive leadership practices. These are the views shared by the participants:

The community members around the school are supportive of learner discipline which helps us as school leaders. DP2

And the Chief himself will tell you any problem, call me before you take the problem or the fight to the union. I will try to negotiate. DP4

As women we cannot shatter the glass ceiling on our own; we need all the stakeholders, like people who are initiating policies, and that's where all our problems start. DP3

Staff members are the first and important stakeholders to work with, once you have their buy-in, it's easy to work. H4

These quotes highlight the critical role of community and stakeholder support in empowering women leaders. Participants noted that community members' backing, particularly in maintaining learner discipline, significantly helps their leadership efforts. This support highlights the need to involve the local community to foster a positive and cooperative school environment. Local leaders, such as chiefs, also play a crucial role. Their willingness to intervene and mediate issues before they escalate to unions shows the importance of influential allies that support women leaders in navigating conflicts and challenges. This support is particularly critical in patriarchal settings where women's authority might be questioned. The sentiment expressed by DP3 emphasises that breaking through the glass ceiling requires more than individual effort; it requires the involvement of all stakeholders. Policymakers must be engaged to ensure that the policies enacted are conducive to gender equity and do not reinforce existing biases. Furthermore, the cooperation of school staff is essential. H4's comment about gaining staff buy-in highlights the importance of internal support within the school. When staff members support their leaders, it becomes easier to implement changes and create a harmonious working environment. This internal collaboration is essential to build a supportive and inclusive school culture.

Theme 5: Potential for transformative change

The findings suggest that CBPR has the potential to catalyse transformative change within educational institutions by centering the voices and experiences of women school leaders. Participants expressed optimism about the possibility of creating more inclusive and gender-responsive educational environments. Their sentiments reflect this optimism:

This is more like an educational workshop where we want our struggles to be known and what can be done about them. DP 3

We need to meet continuously, learn from each other, and share our management stories; this session has the potential to bring about change in our lives. DP 5

I can see that this is of great help because when you're meeting with other leaders, I realise that I am in a pity party stage; I must come out and move forward. DP 4

I firmly believe change will start with us here and challenge the cultural norms that undermine a woman. P7

These excerpts indicate that the potential of CBPR to drive transformative change in educational institutions. Empowering women school leaders in KwaZulu-Natal requires collective action and strong community support. This is due to the deep-rooted history of patriarchy that still believes in male dominance and subordinates women in leadership. Therefore, effective collaboration among all stakeholders addresses systemic barriers and fosters inclusive leadership practices. Engaging these groups helps create an inclusive environment that empowers stakeholders and promotes gender equity in educational leadership.

These excerpts indicate CBPR's potential to drive transformative change by focusing on the experiences of women school leaders and promoting collaborative efforts to tackle gender inequities. DP3's comment highlights the importance of workshops and discussions where women's struggles are acknowledged and solutions are explored. Such educational workshops are platforms for raising awareness about gender inequities and brainstorming actionable strategies to address them. DP5 emphasises the need for continuous meetings and sharing of management experiences. Regular interactions among women leaders foster a sense of community and mutual learning, which can be empowering and motivating. This continuous engagement is crucial for building a supportive network to drive change. DP4's realisation that interaction with other leaders helps her move beyond self-pity and towards proactive action underscores the personal empowerment that CBPR can facilitate. This personal transformation is a critical step towards collective action and advocacy for systemic change. P7's firm belief that change starts with challenging cultural norms from within the group points to the potential of CBPR to instigate cultural shifts. The CBPR approach can, therefore, significantly contribute to transforming educational institutions by centering women's voices and fostering collaborative efforts to address gender inequality.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study point out the importance of community-based participatory approaches in empowering women school leaders and advancing gender equity in educational leadership in KwaZulu-Natal. They provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and community stakeholders seeking to promote inclusive and equitable educational practices. The study reveals several key themes regarding the experiences of women school leaders in KwaZulu-Natal and strategies for their empowerment within the context of CBPR. The findings indicate that women in leadership roles encounter significant challenges stemming from entrenched gendered power dynamics and patriarchal structures within educational institutions. They face gender bias, discrimination, and stereotyping, which restrict their participation in decision-making processes and erode their authority. These challenges reflect broader societal attitudes favouring male leadership, as noted by Msibi and Zuma et al.⁴⁰ The CBPR approach was found to empower women school leaders by providing a collaborative platform where they could voice their experiences and advocate for gender equity. The participatory method fostered a sense of agency, allowing women to challenge existing power structures. And, seek professional and personal growth through formal engagement and skill development platforms. Furthermore, strategies for empowerment include mentorship, networking opportunities, leadership development programs, policy advocacy, and the creation of supportive work environments. These strategies aim to overcome cultural biases and promote gender equality, as emphasised in the feminist theory.

The study highlights that the CBPR approach facilitated a collaborative and participatory research process. Empowering women school leaders to voice their experiences, concerns, and aspirations.

⁴⁰ Msibi, "Gender-Based Challenges Faced by Women in Leadership: A Case Study of One Government Department in KwaZulu-Natal"; Zuma, Hamlall, and Dorasamy, "'The Zulu Way': Experiences and Practices of Black Female Teachers: A Case Study of a Rural Secondary School in Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa."

Participants expressed a sense of agency and empowerment through their involvement in the research process. The approach emphasised the importance of equipping women leaders with the necessary skills to navigate the educational landscape and advocating for healthier and inclusive work environments. The participants identified empowerment strategies, which include providing mentorship and networking opportunities, offering leadership development programs, advocating for policy changes, and creating supportive work environments. These initiatives aim to address systemic barriers and promote inclusive leadership practices. Continuous professional development, expert assistance in policy implementation, and intensive training courses were highlighted as essential. The participants highlighted the importance of collective action and community support in advancing gender equity in educational leadership. They highlighted the need for ongoing collaboration to address systemic barriers and foster inclusive leadership practices.

The findings further reveal that CBPR can drive transformative change by centering the experiences of women school leaders. This approach requires collective action and strong community support to address deep-rooted patriarchy and systemic barriers in educational leadership. Regular interactions and continuous engagement among women leaders foster a sense of community and mutual learning. Empowering them to advocate for cultural shifts and policy changes that promote gender equity. CBPR's potential lies in sustained engagement and advocacy for more inclusive and gender-responsive educational environments. This aligns with feminist theory, which provides a critical lens for understanding gender dynamics and power relations. It highlights the systemic barriers and patriarchal structures that contribute to women's underrepresentation in leadership positions. Within the research context, feminist theory helps illuminate the experiences of women school leaders in KwaZulu-Natal, including the challenges they face and the strategies they employ to navigate gendered power dynamics. Furthermore, critical pedagogy challenges dominant power structures and fosters critical consciousness among marginalised groups. It advocates participatory approaches to education that empower people to analyse and transform oppressive systems.

Critical pedagogy informs the CBPR approach by promoting collaboration, dialogue, and collective action among women school leaders and community stakeholders. CBPR emphasises the active involvement of community members in all stages of the research process, from problem identification to action planning and implementation. Rather than the traditional research that was solely invested in one man's power.⁴¹ It seeks to generate meaningful and relevant knowledge for the community, leading to transformative change. CBPR serves as the foundational framework for the research paper, empowering women school leaders in KwaZulu-Natal. It promotes collaboration, dialogue, and shared decision-making among researchers, women school leaders, and community stakeholders. Leading to actionable outcomes that address gender inequities in educational leadership, as alluded to in Hopkinson.⁴² As a result, the integration of feminist theory, critical pedagogy, and CBPR provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing gender dynamics and power relations within educational institutions. This approach highlights the systemic issues and power dynamics at play and promotes empowerment, collaboration, and transformative change within the community.

CONCLUSION

This study calls for the attention of community-based participatory approaches in empowering women school leaders and advancing gender equity in educational leadership within KwaZulu-Natal. The findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and community stakeholders striving to foster inclusive and equitable educational practices. Through a thorough exploration of the experiences of women school leaders, several key themes emerged, revealing widespread challenges. Stemming from entrenched gendered power dynamics and patriarchal structures within educational institutions. Women in leadership roles face difficult obstacles, including gender bias, discrimination, and stereotyping, which hinder their participation in decision-making processes and undermine their authority. As supported by the existing literature, these challenges are symptomatic of broader societal attitudes that favour male

⁴¹ Lee et al., "Journey to Hope, Self-Expression and Community Engagement: Youth-Led Arts-Based Participatory Action Research."

⁴² Hopkinson, Wright, and Corner, "Seeking New Methodology for Palliative Care Research: Challenging Assumptions about Studying People Who Are Approaching the End of Life."

leadership. By providing a collaborative platform for voicing experiences and advocating for gender equity, CBPR fostered a sense of agency among participants. The participatory method facilitated the participation in formal platforms for skill development, further promoting empowerment and professional growth. Empowerment strategies, such as mentorship, networking opportunities, leadership development programs, policy advocacy, and the creation of supportive work environments, were identified as crucial in overcoming cultural biases and promoting gender equality. These strategies resonate with feminist theory, emphasising the importance of challenging patriarchal structures and advocating for inclusivity and equity. Through integrating feminist theory, critical pedagogy, and CBPR, this study offers a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing gender dynamics and power relations within educational institutions. It highlights the systemic issues at play and advocates for empowerment, collaboration, and transformative change within the community, ultimately contributing to advancing gender equity in educational leadership in KwaZulu-Natal.

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