

Female Educators Transitioning to Leadership Positions: Evaluating the Challenges and Opportunities



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ABSTRACT

The promotion of female educators to school leadership positions does not come easy. It is sometimes coupled with challenges. These challenges can stand in the way of these women in effective leadership, whereas opportunities to grow can make these women prosper and lead effectively. This research study evaluated the challenges and opportunities for female educators transitioning from teaching to leadership roles. This research study was approached qualitatively using an interpretive paradigm. It was purposively sampled with 10 departmental heads, 10 deputy principals and 10 principals using four groups. Thematic analysis of data revealed the following challenges, i.e. gender stereotypes, lack of capacity-building programmes, exclusion from decision-making platforms and lack of support from the School Management Team. The following opportunities were also revealed, i.e., networking, support from family and friends, knowing and undertaking management roles and responsibilities accordingly, and love and passion for learners. This study recommends that teachers should be taught about equal treatment of leaders irrespective of their gender and accept them as leaders equally. The Department of Basic Education should have capacity building workshops for newly appointed leaders so that they become equipped with knowledge about their leadership roles and responsibilities. The School Management Teams should orient and accommodate newly appointed women leaders and involve them in decision-making and provide support where necessary. This study further recommends that new leaders should network with their peers and experienced leaders until they understand their roles and responsibilities. Newly appointed leaders should ensure that they execute their roles effectively and efficiently and have love and passion for learners.

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INTRODUCTION

"Every leadership transition creates uncertainties. Will the new leader uncover and seize opportunities? Will the changes be successful and sustainable?"¹

These are some of the questions asked about someone transitioning to a new leadership position. Whoever transitions to a new leadership position faces uncertainties because she/he does not know what the new position has in store for him/her. Those transitioning are expected to uncover and seize opportunities. However, no one is sure that they will do so. As new leaders, they are also required to

¹ Scott Keller and Mary Meaney, "Successfully Transitioning to New Leadership Roles," *McKinsey Quarterly*, 2018.

introduce changes, but no one is certain whether they will be successful and sustainable. Female educators also find themselves in the same situation as they get promoted from being subject teachers to school leaders. According to Leithwood et al., and Robinson et.al, school leadership is recognised as being essential to school improvement.² Harris and Jones confirm that one of the key topics of discussion in the global discourse on educational reform and development is the viability and potential of teacher leadership.³ In the same vein, teachers are truly at the vanguard of co-constructing change and educational reform, with potentially beneficial and empowering outcomes.⁴ One of the outcomes is school performance and improved learner outcomes. Education research has shown that school leadership is critical in improving academic performance and school climate.⁵ These female educators, getting promoted to school leadership positions, are expected to outdo themselves for the benefit of the schools.

Challenges are dominating the public discourse relative to female educators and leadership positions. Several studies show that women are still underrepresented and discriminated against in leadership positions, even in the face of global efforts to promote gender equality and fairness in education.⁶ Jali, Suknunan, and Bhana continue to highlight that the South African education sector is known for its persistent underrepresentation of women in senior roles.⁷ However, history and experience in South Africa have demonstrated that women are capable of leading and will continue to desire to do so.⁸ In the same vein, Harris and Jones highlight that the success of any reform initiative largely depends on how women teachers actively lead the change and contribute to it.⁹

However, there are some challenges they face in their leadership roles. Studies that already exist do not outline or recommend any solution to the problems faced by women leaders.¹⁰ They need to transform their professional identities, manage emotions, make decisions, and interact with others.¹¹ This simply means that if leadership is to be successfully practised, professional identity development is essential. According to several researchers, such as Barret and Beyer, school principals inspire others to fulfill the school's vision and mission by leading them in that direction.¹² As a result, they assume the roles of curators and custodians of the school's vision, mission, and values. They must, therefore, exhibit specific leadership traits to establish and preserve high-quality schools in challenging settings. In

² Kenneth Leithwood, Alma Harris, and David Hopkins, "Seven Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership Revisited," *School Leadership & Management* 40, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 5–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077>; Viviane M J Robinson, Claire A Lloyd, and Kenneth J Rowe, "The Impact of Leadership on Student Outcomes: An Analysis of the Differential Effects of Leadership Types," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 44, no. 5 (2008): 635–74.

³ Alma Harris and Michelle Jones, "Teacher Leadership and Educational Change," *School Leadership & Management* (Taylor & Francis, 2019).

⁴ G. Donaldson, *Successful Futures: Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales* (Wales: Welsh Government, 2015).

⁵ Christopher Day, Pam Sammons, and Kristine Gorgen, *Successful School Leadership: Linking with Learning and Achievement* (Maidenhead: Open University Press/McGraw Hill, 2011); Philip Hallinger and Ronald H Heck, "Collaborative Leadership and School Improvement: Understanding the Impact on School Capacity and Student Learning," *School Leadership and Management* 30, no. 2 (2010): 95–110; Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins, "Seven Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership Revisited."

⁶ Easaw Alemayehu, "Gender and Leadership in Ethiopian Higher Education: Challenges and Opportunities: The Case of Addis Ababa University," *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal* 25 (2021): 1–22; M. O. Mokhele, "Effective Implementation of a Strategic Framework for Gender Equality in the Public Service with Specific Reference to Leadership Governance" (University of the Free State, South Africa, 2016).

⁷ Nokwanda Jali, Sachin Suknunan, and Anrasha 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.

⁸ Buhle Stella Nhlumayo and Ntombikayise Nkosi, "Are You the First Lady? A Demand for Resilient Leadership Practices for Women Leading Selected South African Rural Primary Schools," *Research in Educational Policy and Management* 6, no. 2 (2024): 104–16.

⁹ Nhlumayo and Nkosi, "Are You the First Lady? A Demand for Resilient Leadership Practices for Women Leading Selected South African Rural Primary Schools"; Harris and Jones, "Teacher Leadership and Educational Change."

¹⁰ Shikha Vyas-Doorgapersad and Ayola Bangani, "The Implementation of Gender Equality within the South African Public Service (1994–2019)," *Africa's Public Service Delivery and Performance Review* 8, no. 1 (2020): 1–10; Siviwe Bangani and Luyanda Dube, "South African Academic Libraries as Contributors to Social Justice and Ubuntu through Community Engagement," *IFLA Journal* 49, no. 3 (October 27, 2023): 541–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03400352231166751>; Habib Sulthon Asnawi and Habib Ismail, "Discrimination against Wife in the Perspective of CEDAW and Islam Mubādalāh," *Ijtihad : Jurnal Wacana Hukum Islam Dan Kemanusiaan* 20, no. 2 (December 31, 2020): 253–68, <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijtihad.v20i2.253-268>.

¹¹ James Denny, "Factors of Faith in Immortality," in *The Expositor, Eighth Series, Volume 1*, ed. Robertson W. Nicoll (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1911).

¹² Catherine Barrett and Robert Breyer, "The Influence of Effective Leadership on Teaching and Learning," *Journal of Research Initiatives* 1, no. 2 (2014): 3; Eric Tingle, Antonio Corrales, and Michelle L Peters, "Leadership Development Programs: Investing in School Principals," *Educational Studies* 45, no. 1 (2019): 1–16.

addition, given the complexity of these circumstances, school leaders ought to possess the multi-faceted skills that are necessary for effective leadership.¹³

To manage pressure in accordance with the accepted and even inherent male and female qualities, society typically organises and manipulates its members in general and women in particular.¹⁴ To date, it is happening regardless of the government initiatives that are enshrined in section 9 (3) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 which emphasizes a woman's right to be free from gender-based discrimination. This simply means that women are afforded the same status as their male counterparts. Lack of leadership training, resistance from peers, and the complexities of balancing administrative tasks with educational goals are some of the challenges women leaders face in the male-dominated setting in terms of the positions. These have been evidently found in the study conducted by Steyn on the challenges women had to contend with in leadership.¹⁵ It is believed that the success or failure of a school is determined by the calibre of its management. To promote a culture of lifelong teaching and learning in their institutions, teachers who want to or currently hold managerial roles and responsibilities must expand their knowledge and sharpen their abilities.¹⁶ However, Klaa cautions us that the achievement of women's empowerment will be impossible in an environment where patriarchy is permitted to thrive.¹⁷ The other challenge that women leaders face in schools is resistance from peers. Female leaders are frequently met with less acceptance compared to their male counterparts. In addition, it is common for subordinates to exhibit less regard for women leaders compared to their male colleagues. This implies that women face the difficulty of striving for societal acceptance by exerting more effort to excel in their leadership roles. The last challenge women face is the complexities of balancing administrative tasks with educational goals.

Although the difficulty of balancing professional and personal lives is not exclusive to women, it disproportionately affects females compared to males, as Moreno, Díez, and Ferreira have established.¹⁸ Therefore, usually, even when coaching possibilities are available, women are compelled to prioritise their families at the cost of their aspirations and professional endeavors to achieve success as leaders. Coleman asserts that the family continues to be recognised as the cornerstone of a thriving society.¹⁹ It is commonly believed and supported by evidence that women are primarily responsible for family-related tasks, such as managing the household, taking care of family members, and handling financial matters.²⁰ The biggest challenge for women who aspire to have both a profession and a family is finding a balance between the two, which hinders their path to leadership.²¹ Women face challenges in juggling their responsibilities as mothers, wives, homemakers, and professionals. This can also hinder the progress of ambitious female leaders as they often lack support from their spouses.

The purpose of this research is, therefore, to evaluate the challenges and opportunities for female educators transitioning from teaching to leadership roles. It analyses the challenges that female educators face as they assume their new leadership positions. It also looks at the opportunities that make these female educators prosper and shine in their new positions. Evaluating the challenges and opportunities will shed light on those female educators still to be promoted to leadership positions. This study will

¹³ R. C. Vick, "Use of the SREB Leadership Development Framework in Preservice Principal Preparation Programs: A Qualitative Investigation" (East Tennessee State University, 2004).

¹⁴ G M Steyn, "The Challenges Facing Women Aspiring for School Leadership Positions in South African Primary Schools," *Gender and Behaviour* 13, no. 1 (2015): 6607–20.

¹⁵ Steyn, "The Challenges Facing Women Aspiring for School Leadership Positions in South African Primary Schools."

¹⁶ I. Van Deventer and A. G. Kruger, *An Educator's Guide to School Management Skills* (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 2010).

¹⁷ 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 (December 29, 2021): 508–18, [https://doi.org/10.21511/ppm.19\(4\).2021.41](https://doi.org/10.21511/ppm.19(4).2021.41).

¹⁸ Antonia Moreno, Fernando Díez, and Luana Ferreira, "Business Leadership from a Gender Perspective and Its Impact on the Work Environment and Employee's Well-Being in Companies in the Basque Country," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 1 (December 21, 2021): 30, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19010030>.

¹⁹ Micere Keels, "Getting Them Enrolled Is Only Half the Battle: College Success as a Function of Race or Ethnicity, Gender, and Class.," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 83, no. 2–3 (April 2013): 310–22, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajop.12033>.

²⁰ Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Discipleship* (New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1987); Eugenia Proctor Gerdes, "Women in Higher Education since 1970: The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same," *Advancing Women in Leadership Journal*, 2006; Barbara Rivers Wrushen and Whitney H Sherman, "Women Secondary School Principals: Multicultural Voices from the Field," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 21, no. 5 (2008): 457–69.

²¹ Jafeth E Sanchez and Bill Thornton, "Gender Issues in K-12 Educational Leadership," *Advancing Women in Leadership Journal* 30 (2010).

equip the ‘to be promoted’ female educators with the necessary strategies and skills for dealing with the challenges of new positions. This paper is dominated by two questions: What are the challenges and opportunities for female educators transitioning to school leadership positions? How can female educators deal with the challenges of new school leadership positions?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Opportunities arising from teachers transitioning from the classroom to a leadership role

According to Mashall, as cited in Höpfl and Matilal, women have historically been barred from applying for management positions.²² There is a preconception that women are perceived as less serious and less motivated compared to their male colleagues due to the differences in their worldwide work experience profiles. This is also somewhat accountable for her distinct management style compared to her male colleagues. However, De Witt argues that women in educational management roles can attain the same remarkable accomplishments as their male counterparts.²³ Women possess distinct management styles, compassionate viewpoints, and exceptional abilities that empower them to make remarkable contributions in educational settings. This results in the development of well-rounded individuals who can thrive in the world. According to Lange, it is essential for women who perceive themselves as leaders to be given the opportunity to gain further knowledge about the historical achievements of women.²⁴ Gaining this knowledge is crucial for laying the foundation for future knowledge. One of the influential narratives in South Africa is the perceived imposition of women in leadership roles, as well as the prejudiced portrayal of women as failures.²⁵ However, they still rise and bring a wealth of knowledge to educational settings. Collaboration among themselves, with a clear and mutually agreed-upon set of objectives, has the potential to create a long-lasting and substantial effect on the academic achievements of students.²⁶

Cruz-González, Carmen and Jesús posit that leadership is exercised differently by school leaders with different approaches based on the context and the environment.²⁷ It is clear that the expectations of the management role differ based on the school culture in each territory. Most studies have focused on school principals’ leadership identity and teacher identity.²⁸ These researchers determined that the responsibilities of principals should be realigned to focus on factors pertaining to professional practice, and this would enable principals to exert their autonomy and attain professional growth. Lumby in her study on school leaders’ gender strategies found that there is a promotion of the identity of women, acceptance of women’s inferiority and deflecting attention from stigmatizing identities.²⁹ The study conducted by revealed that although many female principals have doubts about their abilities as compared to their male counterparts, they possess advanced skills in organizing, multitasking, and fostering positive and supportive relationships with staff and learners.³⁰ Davids in his study on the experiences of female principals found that the under-representation of women as female principals in South Africa is a barrier

²² Judi Marshall, *Women Managers: Travellers in a Male World, (No Title)* (Chichester: Wiley, 1984); Heather Höpfl and Sumohon Matilal, “‘The Lady Vanishes’: Some Thoughts on Women and Leadership,” *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 20, no. 2 (2007): 198–208.

²³ J. T. De Witt, “The Role of Women in Educational Management,” in *Effective Educational Management*, ed. P. C. van der Westhuizen, 17th impression (Cape Town: Kagiso Tertiary, 2010), 515–90.

²⁴ Catherine Lange, “Attributes of Notable Women Leaders,” *Social Studies Review* 46, no. 1 (2006): 17.

²⁵ Lange, “Attributes of Notable Women Leaders.”

²⁶ L. Sharratt, *Clarity: What Matters Most in Learning, Teaching, and Leading* (London: Corwin Press, 2018).

²⁷ Cristina Cruz-González, Carmen Lucena Rodríguez, and Jesús Domingo Segovia, “A Systematic Review of Principals’ Leadership Identity from 1993 to 2019,” *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 49, no. 1 (January 23, 2021): 31–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143219896053>.

²⁸ Jos Akkermans, Julia Richardson, and Maria L. Kraimer, “The Covid-19 Crisis as a Career Shock: Implications for Careers and Vocational Behavior,” *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 119 (June 2020): 103434, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2020.103434>; Peggy A Ertmer et al., “Using Peer Feedback to Enhance the Quality of Student Online Postings: An Exploratory Study,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12, no. 2 (2007): 412–33; Cruz-González, Rodríguez, and Segovia, “A Systematic Review of Principals’ Leadership Identity from 1993 to 2019.”

²⁹ Jacky Lumby, “School Leaders’ Gender Strategies: Caught in a Discriminatory Web,” *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 43, no. 1 (2015): 28–45.

³⁰ Jacky Lumby et al., “Women School Principals in South Africa: Leading the Way,” 2010.

to understanding the differences in leadership and management between men and women.³¹ It also highlights the fact that women face less support and self-confidence while accessing these roles.

METHODOLOGY

The research paradigm closely followed in this research was an interpretive qualitative paradigm. This paradigm aligns well with this study because it was conducted to evaluate the challenges and opportunities for female educators transitioning from teaching to leadership and how they navigate through them Creswell and Creswell.³² Again, Martínez-Linares et al., define this sampling method as the one that solely relies on the researcher's discretion to choose those participants who possess or exhibit interest and knowledge in the study to share their knowledge on the phenomenon, and in this case, female leaders were chosen to share their experiences on their transition from classroom teachers to leadership positions.³³ This study utilised purposive sampling to recruit individual participants, approaching only female school leaders. Thirty (30) participants composed of 10 principals, 10 deputy principals, and 10 departmental heads in KwaZulu Natal province.

Data were collected through three focus group discussions with participants from a purposively selected sample. These 30 female teachers were selected to gather the relevant information on their transitioning phase from the classroom to the leadership and management roles. All the participants were urged to narrate their own experiences and express their views during focus group interviews and probing inquiries and rephrased some of the topics.³⁴ The data collected from these interviews were analysed employing theme analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke.³⁵ The emerging themes are demonstrated fully below under the findings section of this paper. The researchers followed the six steps as defined by Braun and Clarke which they familiarised themselves with the data, generated codes, searched for the emerged themes that have significance, reviewed the themes that make sense to the collected data, and lastly, defined the essence of the themes before the write-up was done. An ethical and professional research code was upheld throughout the process.³⁶ The Unisa College of Education Ethics Review Committee approved this study. Later, permission letters were sent out to the KwaZulu Natal Department of Education Provincial Office to seek permission and it was granted. Letters were also sent to the participants (principals, deputy principals and departmental heads). The participants engaged in the study voluntarily, had the option to withdraw at any moment, and the acquired information would be returned to them. Their personal information and interviews were consistently deemed secret, and issues of confidentiality were stressed, which led to the use of pseudonyms.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The main purpose of this research was to evaluate the challenges and opportunities for female educators transitioning from teaching to leadership roles. To secure and source out data, three focus groups were held consisting of Departmental Heads (DHs), Deputy Principals (DPs) and Principals (Ps). Owing to the availability of these women leaders, their number in each focus group differed. In the end, there were three focus groups for DHs, Focus Group 1 (FG1), for DPs, Focus Group 2 (FG2) and for Ps, Focus Group 3 (FG3). After employing the thematic data analysis method, the findings revealed that newly appointed women leaders face challenges as they assume their new responsibilities. However, even though there are challenges, they also have opportunities for growth which keep them going and coping with the challenges and pressures of new school leadership positions. Both opportunities and challenges that emerged from data are discussed below.

³¹ Nuraan Davids, "When Identity and Leadership Intersect: The Experiences of Six Female Principals in South Africa," *Africa Education Review* 15, no. 1 (2018): 157–74.

³² Emily Weyant, "Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches: By John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell" (Taylor & Francis, 2022).

³³ Jose Manuel Martínez-Linares et al., "Assessment of Nursing Care and Teaching: A Qualitative Approach," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 16, no. 15 (August 3, 2019): 2774, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16152774>.

³⁴ Martínez-Linares et al., "Assessment of Nursing Care and Teaching: A Qualitative Approach."

³⁵ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology" 3, no. 2 (January 1, 2006): 77–101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>.

³⁶ Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology."

Challenges

Gender stereotypes

One of the challenges newly promoted women leaders face is the gender stereotype directed toward them. Some female educators cannot accept other female educators being school leaders and they go to the extent of sabotaging them so that they fail or look like incompetent leaders. This is supported by assertions from participants.

FG2: *“In my school, two female colleagues did not submit test question papers as per scheduled time and they made me look like a moron in the principal’s office and I know if it was their male friend they would not have done so.”*

FG1: *“When you are leading women, they believe that you don't deserve that position, they rather like being led by a man, even that man who is not a good leader but they will believe in him and gang up against a female. They don't support you... they don't support you if you are a... a woman.”*

FG2: *“There are women who are supporters of patriarchy at work, those old women, not all of them, some of them. But they will make sure that your leadership will be miserable on another level, they won't support you.”*

FG3: *“For example, in my school, I said, my principal is a female, but there was a sabotage of her being a female because female teachers wanted a male principal.”*

The findings suggest that some female educators in a bid to make the newly appointed women leaders will appear incapable do not submit test question papers on time. The reason these female educators do not accept newly appointed female leaders is that they feel they do not deserve to lead; hence, they end up ganging against them. From the look of things, these female educators support patriarchy, and this makes the leadership of new females miserable because these female educators prefer male leaders over female leaders.

Lack of capacity-building programmes

Another challenge newly appointed women leaders face is the lack of capacity-building programmes designed to capacitate newly appointed leaders. The newly appointed women leaders are not trained on how to efficiently and effectively undertake their new leadership roles and this becomes a problem since they end up being unsure of how to assume their new roles and responsibilities in their new positions.

FG1: *“The point to which I was referring is what is happening in our school, no one capacitates us as new DHs.”*

FG2: *“We help each other a lot, but in my school, there is no capacity-building programme for DPs. We take the initiative for ourselves and devise activities for our PLI colleagues.”*

Without capacity-building workshops, new women leaders are thrown into the deep, so they find it difficult to adapt because there is no necessary support.

Exclusion on decision-making platforms

Even though they are leaders, they are sidelined when it comes to meetings where decisions will be made; this becomes a challenge for these new female leaders.

FG1: *“In my school, the first constraint, as a DH is that I'm just an SMT member by name because my salary was raised and I got that appointment letter, but I'm not involved in any kind of decision-making of the school.”*

FG3: *“So, as DHs, we are not involved in any decision-making, even if a teacher works under me, I just run like a puppet to tell teachers, but I cannot make any decision.”*

FG2: *“Some of us are not involved in the decision making whereas we are SMT members. We find out things from the clerks, the school clerks, they end up knowing more than us being in the SMT.”*

These newly appointed women leaders feel they are just members by name, but they are not treated as members of the School Management Teams (SMT). Even if some decisions are taken on their subordinates, they are sometimes not consulted. They feel undermined because there are management issues that they are unaware of that they hear from school clerks although they are SMT members.

Lack of support from School Management Team

Another cry from new women leaders is that SMTs do not support them as envisaged. This becomes a problem when new women leaders assume leadership roles, normally in new environments and yet they do not get enough support from new colleagues in the school management.

FG2: *“We also found that many of us get into positions by being appointed, and if it's through default then you have to meet the severity of not having support from internal structures above.”*

FG1: *“So, you don't get much support, even if you ask if, okay, I have learners with visual impairment who are totally blind they need to... to make maybe the jaws of life. How do I incorporate them? Then... then they will tell you that they do not know inclusive education and then I will see that okay I have to make some plan, like give them groups with different abilities.”*

FG3: *“The girl doing grade 10 reported that she was raped by her uncle and I had to follow the protocol and take the matter up the internal structures but was told to handle it myself on my own. When the matter got serious and the uncle had to be arrested, I was on my own, no one stood by me, I even went to the police station alone.”*

When newly appointed women leaders ask for support from the SMT members, some do not offer the support they ask for. They are told to handle problems by themselves, regardless of the seriousness of the issue and irrespective of whether those problems are school-based or not.

Opportunities

Networking

The findings reveal that one of the actions that keeps the newly promoted women leaders going or surviving in the new working environment is networking. According to these newly promoted women leaders, a network entails making and building relationships with other school leaders to get help, guidance, and support for their new working environment. The participants elaborated:

FG3: *“There is a lot of networking with the mainstream schools, because they...as a resource centre, I am able to give support to the mainstream educators, as I am going to do it tomorrow.”*

FG1: *“DP Getting someone, networking with someone from Gauteng, who is in a full-service school as well, because you can learn from them, you can learn about how things are done there, how are you doing that?”*

FG2: *“DH In terms of networking, I think my school is successful, recognised, and gets good accolades, I think it's because of my networking skills from DH, but your networks, you will find, they will help you, they can give you support.”*

FG1: *“So, networking is a great, brilliant tool, but also in networking, you have to give in too; you can't only take, you have to give also.”*

FG2: *“I do a lot of networking. Most tools that we use at school, I got them from other schools, especially the schools that are doing well, and at the same time, we share experiences, we share everything with those schools. So, networking helps a lot.”*

Newly promoted women leaders network with neighbouring schools that can help them with resources they lack. They also like networking because it enhances learning for new leaders; hence, they regard it as a brilliant tool. It also enables them to share school leadership experiences. For networking, these school leaders choose schools/individuals that are successful, recognised, have good reputations, and are doing well in all spheres affecting their schools.

Family and friends Support

One other aspect that keeps the newly appointed women leaders surviving is the support they receive from their close relatives. These relatives are their children, spouses and friends. The participants alluded:

FG3: *“You asked us about support. I can tell you it's the support from our children, our hubbies, our life partners. Basically, from family and friends. Also, some of us support from their colleagues”.*

Knowing and undertaking your roles and responsibilities accordingly

Knowing their responsibilities and undertaking them accordingly helps the newly promoted women leaders withstand all the pressures and challenges of the new school leadership positions. The participants argued:

FG2: *“But what helps me is that I do my work. The only thing I tell my colleagues is that let's go and do our work. What I mean is that we must do justice, no matter what happens. Somebody said we must shine even in the darkness. I loved that. I loved that. That's what I am doing. I do not work just because I see that the principal is around. I don't work because I see people...even if you are not looking at me, I do my work. That's what helps me.”*

According to these new school leaders, it helps them to do their work accordingly and also encourages subordinates to do the same. According to the participants, doing the work they are employed to do is doing justice. These newly appointed women leaders believe in integrity as one of the principles of good leadership; hence, they do the job even if no one is watching them.

Love and passion for learners

According to participants, the love and passion they have for learners' push and motivate them during times of challenges. They argued that:

FG2: *“When I got promoted to my new school, I could see that I was not welcome by most of the teachers, they didn't like me at all. If it weren't for my passion and love for the children I teach, my life in school would be more miserable. Teaching children keeps me going every day, I even miss them when I'm not at school.”*

FG3: *“The love and passion I have for children are my motivation if I think about the school otherwise, I would be mad because of the way the principal and deputy principal treat me”.*

Findings suggest that even though participants felt unwelcome and loved in new schools, their love and passion for teaching made them strong enough to survive the challenges of the new school leadership positions. According to the participants, the love and passion for learners motivate them during times of difficulties.

DISCUSSION

Challenges

The new women leaders face the challenge of gender stereotypes in the school environment. It appears that the gender stereotype is mostly instigated by other females who, amongst other things, claim that these new females in power do not deserve to be there, but males should be in leadership positions. To show their disapproval of females being leaders, they even sabotage them by not honouring submission dates so that these female leaders can fail and appear incompetent. This makes the new job in a new

environment difficult for some of these new female leaders. New women leaders can struggle in the new environment due to the reception they get from new colleagues and subordinates. This can also disturb the morale since new women leaders may find it challenging to empower subordinates to achieve a collective goal.³⁷ The perpetuation of gender stereotypes promotes the discrimination of women in leadership positions.³⁸ This discrimination makes it difficult for women leaders to actively lead the change and contribute to it. Therefore, gender stereotypes not only affect the working conditions of new female leaders, but they also negatively impact academic performance through sabotage and undermining.

As teachers transition to school leadership positions, some of them do not have leadership experience; hence, they rely on the knowledge they have to undertake their new roles and responsibilities. They need to be capacitated for the new roles and responsibilities. However, there are no provisions for capacity building for these new leaders; they are just thrown into the deep. It becomes a problem since they have to learn on the move, having not been prepared prior to assuming leadership roles and responsibilities. Sometimes they receive training/workshops months after assuming their roles. These new leaders need to be oriented and capacitated so that they undertake their leadership roles with confidence. These new female leaders are expected to possess the multi-faceted skills that are necessary for effective leadership.³⁹

However, without capacity building, they may have inadequate knowledge and skills to lead schools effectively. This is also supported by Steyn who argues that there is a lack of leadership training for some teachers promoted to school leadership positions.⁴⁰ On the same note, Duchscher and Windey lament that newly appointed school leaders experience increasing levels of intensity and anxiety due to unfamiliar professional practices in new school environments.⁴¹ Therefore, the lack of capacity-building workshops has a bearing on how new women leaders operate and influence change.

The findings reveal that some newly appointed women leaders are excluded from meetings where drastic decisions will be taken. This tendency makes them feel undermined and belittled due to shenanigans. They feel devastated if they hear through school clerks about critical issues affecting the school whereas they are unaware of such issues, yet they are members of the SMT. This is a worrying factor because new women leaders should be part and parcel of decisions taken. Even though these women made it to school leadership, being excluded on some occasions can be aligned with discrimination.⁴² According to De Witt, women in educational management roles should attain the same remarkable accomplishments as their male counterparts.⁴³ However, this is not the case with some women school leaders who are sidelined from decision-making platforms just because they are women. Klaa argues that women are less accepted compared to their male counterparts.⁴⁴ The exclusion of women in decision-making platforms can be associated with less acceptance by the SMT just because they are women. Therefore, the exclusion of some women in some decision-making meetings affects the morale of these new school leaders.

Some new women school leaders do not get support from their peers and colleagues from the SMT. This makes their work difficult since they are new in their roles and some are new even in schools where they have been promoted and they need someone to hold their hand and show them how things are done in this new environment. If those leaders familiar with the school do not support the new leaders amicably, that can stress the new women in leadership. The lack of support from the SMT can impact

³⁷ M Moradi Korejan and Hasan Shahbazi, "An Analysis of the Transformational Leadership Theory," *Journal of Fundamental and Applied Sciences* 8, no. 3 (2016): 452–61.

³⁸ Alemayehu, "Gender and Leadership in Ethiopian Higher Education: Challenges and Opportunities: The Case of Addis Ababa University."

³⁹ Vick, "Use of the SREB Leadership Development Framework in Preservice Principal Preparation Programs: A Qualitative Investigation."

⁴⁰ Steyn, "The Challenges Facing Women Aspiring for School Leadership Positions in South African Primary Schools."

⁴¹ Judy Boychuk Duchscher and Maryann Windey, "Stages of Transition and Transition Shock," *Journal for Nurses in Professional Development* 34, no. 4 (2018): 228–32.

⁴² Jali, Suknunan, and Bhana, "Challenges Impeding Women into Leadership Roles in a Student-Led Organization at a South African Higher Education Institution."

⁴³ De Witt, "The Role of Women in Educational Management."

⁴⁴ Cherifa Klaa, "Role of African Women in Development and Economic Life: Reality and Challenges," *International Journal of Inspiration & Resilience Economy* 4, no. 1 (2020): 1–9.

how the new women in new positions undertake their responsibilities since they need orientation and induction on this new way of life. As these women leaders assume their new roles and responsibilities in new schools, they are prepared to bring about changes Duchscher and Windey so that they show what they are worth, but they cannot do this without support from internal structures.⁴⁵ Also, without support from SMT, new women leaders may find empowering subordinates to achieve a collective goal.⁴⁶ Therefore, the support from the SMT to the new school leaders is trivial.

Opportunities

The findings reveal that new women leaders make use of networking to get support and guidance from experienced school leaders. This helps newly appointed women leaders to lead schools and departments efficiently. Networking enables the new women leaders to stand on the shoulders of experienced giants in the field and thus get motivated as they assume their responsibilities as school leaders. Networking benefits and empowers these new school leaders since they interact with experienced school leaders.⁴⁷ One of the reasons they network is to learn from those who have experience in school leadership positions and also get support through resources from them. These newly appointed women leaders, use, amongst other things, use networking to improve academic performance and school climate.⁴⁸ These new female leaders use networking to encourage their subordinates to increase their creativity and self-actualization levels by encouraging the team, Putra, Rofiaty and Djumahir.⁴⁹ Therefore, networking enables new women leaders to create more opportunities for themselves as well as for the school, and thus better performance of both departments and schools.

One of the coping strategies for newly appointed women leaders is derived and provided by friends and families for these new female leaders. Their families and friends provide support, which enables these new women leaders to survive the new pressure and challenges of the school leadership positions. Cho et al., note that families and friends offer social and emotional support to these new school leaders.⁵⁰ Additionally, Cho et al., articulate that the kind and level of support that new female leaders received at home and from friends assisted them in maintaining the quality of their work.⁵¹ Even though these new women leaders faceless support when in leadership positions, the support from their families and friends helps them to prosper and face challenges.⁵² Therefore, support from friends and family helps them to cope with school challenges.

Another way new women leaders use to survive and withstand the new work pressure is by knowing and undertaking the responsibilities they are employed. They undertake their responsibilities with commitment and dedication to prove what they are worth. As they undertake these new responsibilities, they strive to do justice to their subordinates. The new school leaders also encourage and motivate their subordinates to do justice by doing the work as expected. As they do this, these women school leaders show the capability of leading and influencing their subordinates to do the work well.⁵³ This is in line with transformative leadership, which advocates for leaders to motivate their followers to achieve the goals of the institution.⁵⁴ Therefore, it is crucial for the newly appointed school leaders to know their responsibilities so that they shine in their new positions and thus, opportunities for them.

Some newly appointed women leaders are not welcomed in their new schools. As a result, some find the new working environment uncondusive. However, the love and passion for learners enable them to continue as if nothing is wrong. His findings suggest that the lives of these new women leaders would

⁴⁵ Duchscher and Windey, "Stages of Transition and Transition Shock."

⁴⁶ Korejan and Shahbazi, "An Analysis of the Transformational Leadership Theory."

⁴⁷ Donaldson, *Successful Futures: Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales*.

⁴⁸ Day, Sammons, and Gorgen, *Successful School Leadership: Linking with Learning and Achievement*.

⁴⁹ Irsyam Asri Putra, Rofiaty Rofiaty, and Djumahir Djumahir, "Investigating the Influence of Entrepreneurial Orientation and Transformational Leadership on Organisational Performance with the Mediation of Innovation: Evidences from a State-Owned Electricity Company in Indonesia," *International Journal of Innovation Management* 24, no. 07 (2020): 2050085.

⁵⁰ Yonjoo Cho et al., "South Korean Women Leaders' Struggles for a Work and Family Balance," *Human Resource Development International* 18, no. 5 (October 20, 2015): 521–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2015.1076562>.

⁵¹ Cho et al., "South Korean Women Leaders' Struggles for a Work and Family Balance."

⁵² Davids, "When Identity and Leadership Intersect: The Experiences of Six Female Principals in South Africa."

⁵³ Nhlumayo and Nkosi, "Are You the First Lady? A Demand for Resilient Leadership Practices for Women Leading Selected South African Rural Primary Schools."

⁵⁴ Korejan and Shahbazi, "An Analysis of the Transformational Leadership Theory."

be miserable without learners taking into account the treatment they get from their colleagues. So, with love and passion for work, one can survive and withstand some work-related challenges. The situation in the new work environment compels new women leaders to find a way of surviving, as argued by Cruz-González, Carmen and Jesús, that school leaders exercise leadership differently using different approaches based on the context and the environment.⁵⁵ This suggests that hanging onto the love and passion for learners is the approach new school leaders use to cope with the school environment. Therefore, the love and passion for a job can make one survive the difficulties of the new work environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was undertaken to evaluate the challenges and opportunities for female educators transitioning from teaching to leadership roles. Using thematic data analysis, the findings revealed that women leaders face a challenge of gender stereotype where newly promoted women leaders are undermined based on being women. This study, therefore, recommends that teachers should be taught about equal treatment of leaders irrespective of their gender and accept them as leaders equally. Equal treatment will mean that teachers look at women leaders as women but only as leaders who deserve equal treatment as their male counterparts. The findings also revealed that some newly appointed women leaders face a challenge of the lack of capacity-building programmes. This implies that women leaders need capacity building programmes. In line with this, this study recommends that the Department of Basic Education should have capacity building workshops for newly appointed leaders so that they do not undertake their leadership roles without being capacitated about expectations, roles and responsibilities. In other words, the DBE should not expect leaders to undertake their roles and responsibilities effectively without being trained or capacitated.

Another challenge for women in leadership is that some SMTs exclude newly promoted leaders in decision-making platforms. The SMTs are the closest peers to these new leaders and they are the ones expected to accommodate and orient the new leaders since they are new in these schools. However, it is devastating to find the existing SMTs sideline new women leaders when taking decisions. Sequel to this, this study recommends that should orientate and accommodate newly appointed women leaders and involve them in decision making and provide support where necessary. This study recommends that networking can help new leaders understand the dynamics of their new positions. Nothing can be compared to the support from friends and family in times of shenanigans, especially in a workstation. This study further recommends that knowing and undertaking one's roles and responsibilities with integrity can earn the respect of saboteurs. Lastly, the love and passion for something or someone can keep making a leader survive difficult times.

CONCLUSION

This study was undertaken to evaluate the challenges and opportunities for female educators transitioning from teaching to leadership roles. To this end, this study found that gender stereotype is a morass and thus impede the proper running of schools due to unfair treatment and discrimination against women leaders. The lack of capacity-building programmes affect newly appointed women leaders because they assume leadership positions without any training. Therefore, they need to be equipped so that they can act in their new leadership positions. The exclusion of women leaders in decision-making meetings makes them feel undermined and discriminated against because of their gender; they also feel less important as leaders. The lack of support from the SMT makes the lives of new women leaders difficult in the new environment because they do not know the dynamics of the new schools where they are promoted. Newly promoted women leaders expect a warm welcome from their immediate colleagues, i.e., SMT since they are also part of the SMT.

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