



# Exploring gender representation in leadership roles in Early Childhood Education in the Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

Gender representation in leadership roles within early childhood education (ECE) has been a topic of global concern, as leadership positions are often disproportionately occupied by men despite women forming the majority of educators. This study investigated gender representation in leadership roles in ECE settings in the Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. Using a qualitative research approach within a critical interpretivist paradigm, a case study design was adopted. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 ECE practitioners and school administrators. Purposive sampling identified participants who held leadership positions or were aspiring to them. Data were thematically analysed to identify patterns of gender representation, barriers, and opportunities in leadership. The study was delimited to rural ECE centres in Vhembe District. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, thick description, and peer debriefing, while ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. The findings revealed that male educators are disproportionately represented in managerial roles despite women dominating teaching positions, and that socio-cultural perceptions influence leadership opportunities. Recommendations include implementing gender equity policies and leadership development programmes for women in ECE. Therefore, promoting equitable gender representation in leadership is critical for strengthening ECE governance and improving educational outcomes. This study contributes to scholarship by expanding knowledge on gender disparities in leadership within rural Early Childhood Education contexts, while also providing context-specific insights and practical strategies to inform gender equity policies, leadership development programmes, and inclusive governance practices.

**Keywords:** *Gender Representation, Early Childhood Education, Women Leaders, Rural Schools*

## INTRODUCTION

Leadership in Early Childhood Education (ECE) plays a critical role in shaping quality learning environments, guiding curriculum implementation, supporting educators, and fostering effective institutional management. Despite women forming the majority of early childhood educators globally, leadership positions within ECE are often disproportionately occupied by men, reflecting broader

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**PUBLICATION HISTORY** - Received : 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 2026 | Accepted: 22<sup>nd</sup> May, 2026 | Published: 14<sup>th</sup> July, 2026.

**TO CITE THIS ARTICLE** – Sikhwari, Matodzi. G. "Exploring gender representation in leadership roles in Early Childhood Education in the Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, South Africa," *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 7, no.6 (2026): 1442 - 1454. <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.2026762>

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societal, cultural, and institutional dynamics.<sup>1</sup> In rural South African contexts such as the Vhembe District in Limpopo Province, these disparities are compounded by resource constraints, traditional gender norms, and limited professional development opportunities for women aspiring to leadership roles.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, leadership in rural ECE settings may not fully reflect the workforce's demographic composition, potentially limiting the effectiveness of decision-making processes, teacher support, and innovative practices in early learning environments.

Globally, research highlights that gendered expectations and professional hierarchies hinder women's advancement into leadership roles, even in female-dominated professions such as ECE.<sup>3</sup> In South Africa, rural ECE centres face additional socio-cultural barriers, including community perceptions that favour men as decision-makers, limited mentorship for women, and unequal access to formal leadership training.<sup>4</sup> These factors not only restrict women's career progression but may also affect institutional governance and children's learning outcomes, as leadership diversity has been associated with more participatory, inclusive, and collaborative educational practices. Therefore, addressing gender disparities in leadership is essential to ensure equitable participation, professional growth, and inclusive learning environments that benefit both educators and learners.

Despite the predominance of women in ECE classrooms, there is a notable underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within rural centres in the Vhembe District. This imbalance highlights a critical problem: women's perspectives and leadership capacities are underutilized, while decision-making remains concentrated among male leaders. The lack of structured policies and programmes to support women's advancement into leadership positions perpetuates systemic inequalities, undermining institutional efficiency, teacher support, and the implementation of innovative teaching practices. Without interventions that specifically target these barriers, the leadership landscape in rural ECE centres is unlikely to reflect the professional demographics of the workforce or adequately respond to the needs of educators and learners.<sup>5</sup>

In response to this problem, the study aims to explore gender representation in leadership roles within ECE centres in the Vhembe District, Limpopo Province. Specifically, the study seeks to examine the current gender distribution in leadership positions, investigate barriers and opportunities that influence women's access to leadership, assess the impact of gender representation on educational outcomes and institutional culture, and propose strategies to promote equitable gender representation in ECE leadership. The objectives of this study are deliberately aligned with the aim:

1. By examining the distribution of gender in leadership, the research identifies existing inequalities.
2. By exploring barriers and opportunities, it uncovers the factors shaping leadership access; by assessing impacts on educational outcomes, it demonstrates why equitable representation matters; and
3. By proposing strategies, it offers practical solutions to achieve gender equity in leadership.

Collectively, these objectives guide the article towards a comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics in ECE leadership and inform recommendations for policy, practice, and professional development.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature highlights persistent gender disparities in leadership within ECE, where men often occupy managerial positions despite women dominating teaching roles. While many studies acknowledge the existence of these inequalities, scholars differ in their explanations of the underlying causes and the effectiveness of proposed interventions. Some researchers attribute gender imbalances primarily to

<sup>1</sup> J. Acker, *Gendered Organizations and the Dynamics of Inequality in Education* (London, UK: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> N. Mkhize and M. Sibanda, "Gender Disparities in Leadership in South African Early Childhood Education," *South African Journal of Education* 41, no. 3 (2021): 1–11.

<sup>3</sup> L. Morley, *Women and Educational Leadership: Challenges and Opportunities* (London: Springer, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Traditions* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Mkhize and Sibanda, "Gender Disparities in Leadership in South African Early Childhood Education."

socio-cultural norms and patriarchal beliefs, whereas others emphasise institutional structures, policy limitations, and organisational cultures that sustain male dominance in leadership. This review critically examines and synthesises these perspectives to provide a deeper understanding of gender representation in ECE leadership.

### **Global Perspectives on Gender Representation in Early Childhood Education Leadership**

Globally, ECE remains a female-dominated profession; however, leadership positions are disproportionately occupied by men. Scholars generally agree that this contradiction reflects broader gender inequalities embedded within educational institutions and society. Coleman argues that leadership is socially associated with masculine characteristics, such as authority and decisiveness, leading to biased recruitment and promotion practices.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Blackmore contends that professional hierarchies within ECE position women primarily as caregivers while assigning men to administrative and decision-making roles.<sup>7</sup> These studies collectively demonstrate how gender stereotypes influence institutional leadership structures.

However, while both studies identify structural inequality, they differ in emphasis. Coleman focuses on societal perceptions and cultural constructions of leadership, whereas Blackmore highlights organisational arrangements and professional hierarchies within institutions. This suggests that gender disparities in ECE leadership cannot be explained solely by culture or institutions, but rather by the interaction between societal beliefs and institutional practices. Bush et al. extend this argument by demonstrating how informal professional networks and mentorship systems often exclude women, limiting their access to leadership pathways despite equivalent qualifications and experience.<sup>8</sup>

The literature also reveals that women's leadership experiences are not homogeneous. Blackmore introduces an intersectional perspective by arguing that gender intersects with factors such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and geographic location to shape leadership opportunities differently across contexts.<sup>9</sup> This perspective challenges earlier studies that treated women as a uniform category and broadens understanding of how marginalisation operates within ECE leadership. In rural and under-resourced settings, women may experience multiple layers of disadvantage, suggesting that leadership inequalities are more complex than gender alone.

Despite identifying persistent barriers, the global scholarship proposes several strategies to promote gender equity. Lumby and Coleman emphasise mentorship programmes, leadership training, and gender-inclusive institutional policies as effective interventions.<sup>10</sup> However, these studies also indicate that policy reforms alone are insufficient when cultural attitudes remain unchanged. This highlights a critical tension within the literature: While structural reforms may create opportunities for women, deeply rooted patriarchal norms may continue to undermine women's leadership advancement. Consequently, sustainable gender equity requires both institutional transformation and broader social change.

Overall, the global literature demonstrates consensus that gender inequality in ECE leadership is systemic rather than incidental. Nevertheless, scholars differ on whether socio-cultural norms or institutional arrangements are the primary drivers of inequality. Synthesising these perspectives suggests that leadership disparities emerge through the interaction of societal expectations, organisational cultures, and unequal access to professional opportunities.

### **Gender Representation in Leadership Roles in South African Early Childhood Education**

South African studies reflect many of the global patterns identified in the literature, although local socio-cultural and historical realities intensify these inequalities. Women constitute the majority of ECE

<sup>6</sup> Marianne Coleman, "Leadership and Diversity," *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 40, no. 5 (2012): 592–609.

<sup>7</sup> Jill Blackmore, "A Feminist Critical Perspective on Educational Leadership," *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 16, no. 2 (2013): 139–54.

<sup>8</sup> Tony Bush et al., "School Leadership and Gender in Africa: A Systematic Overview," *Research in Educational Administration and Leadership* 7, no. 4 (2022): 680–712.

<sup>9</sup> Blackmore, "A Feminist Critical Perspective on Educational Leadership."

<sup>10</sup> Jacky Lumby, "Valuing Knowledge over Action: The Example of Gender in Educational Leadership," *Gender and Education* 25, no. 4 (2013): 432–43; Coleman, "Leadership and Diversity."

educators, yet leadership positions remain disproportionately occupied by men, particularly in rural contexts. Similar to global findings, leadership is often associated with masculine authority, reinforcing patriarchal assumptions regarding decision-making and management.<sup>11</sup>

However, South African scholarship highlights unique contextual dimensions that differentiate it from international studies. Sikhwari and Mudau argue that rural cultural expectations place women primarily within domestic and caregiving roles, limiting their professional mobility and leadership aspirations.<sup>12</sup> This finding aligns with Acker's argument that institutional systems reproduce gendered power relations. However, while Acker focuses largely on organisational structures, South African researchers place stronger emphasis on the influence of community beliefs and traditional norms in shaping leadership opportunities. This suggests that leadership inequalities in South Africa are reinforced simultaneously by institutions and cultural expectations at the community level.

Another significant debate within the literature concerns the impact of gender representation on educational outcomes. Morley argues that diverse leadership structures promote collaborative governance, inclusive decision-making, and improved learner support.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, some institutional studies focus primarily on representation statistics without critically examining how gender diversity influences institutional effectiveness. Therefore, the literature demonstrates a gap between quantitative representations and qualitative experiences of leadership. Merely increasing the number of women in leadership may not automatically transform institutional cultures unless broader systemic inequalities are addressed.

The literature further critiques the inadequacy of institutional support for aspiring female leaders. Dyantyi and Sikhwari advocate for leadership development programmes, mentorship initiatives, and networking opportunities targeted at women.<sup>14</sup> Although these interventions are widely recommended, the literature provides limited evidence on their long-term effectiveness in rural ECE contexts. This indicates the need for further research exploring how gender equity strategies function within specific socio-cultural environments, such as the Vhembe District.

Collectively, South African studies demonstrate that gender disparities in ECE leadership are shaped by interconnected cultural, institutional, and policy-related factors. The literature suggests that achieving equitable representation requires more than policy compliance; it demands transformation of institutional cultures, leadership perceptions, and community attitudes toward women in positions of authority.

### **Socio-Cultural Barriers to Women's Leadership in Early Childhood Education**

The literature consistently identifies socio-cultural factors as major barriers to women's advancement in leadership in ECE. Scholars argue that patriarchal norms continue to define leadership as masculine while associating women with caregiving responsibilities.<sup>15</sup> These cultural expectations influence recruitment practices, professional recognition, and women's self-perceptions as potential leaders.

Nevertheless, researchers differ in their interpretations of how these barriers operate. Mkhize and Sibanda emphasise practical constraints, such as family responsibilities, mobility limitations, and insufficient childcare support, and argue that women's domestic obligations limit their participation in leadership opportunities.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, Morley emphasises the psychological and professional consequences, arguing that social stereotypes undermine women's confidence, professional identity, and

<sup>11</sup> Ntsika Dyantyi, "Crossing the Bridge to Leadership: A South African Experience of Female Principals to Secondary School Leadership," *Journal of Culture and Values in Education* 8, no. 1 (2025): 224–39.

<sup>12</sup> Matodzi G Sikhwari and Thizwilondi J. Mudau, "Cultural Barriers to Education: Addressing Absenteeism among Marginalized Groups in South Africa," *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, December 24, 2024, 3270–79, <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.202451646>.

<sup>13</sup> Morley, *Women and Educational Leadership: Challenges and Opportunities*.

<sup>14</sup> Dyantyi, "Crossing the Bridge to Leadership: A South African Experience of Female Principals to Secondary School Leadership"; Matodzi Sikhwari, "Gender Disparities in Educational Wastage: Analysing the Factors Contributing to Female Dropout Rates in Rural South Africa," *African Journal of Development Studies (Formerly AFFRIKA Journal of Politics, Economics and Society)* 2024, no. 1 (December 1, 2024): 289–303, <https://doi.org/10.31920/2634-3649/2024/sin1a14>.

<sup>15</sup> Acker, *Gendered Organizations and the Dynamics of Inequality in Education*; Sikhwari, "Gender Disparities in Educational Wastage: Analysing the Factors Contributing to Female Dropout Rates in Rural South Africa."

<sup>16</sup> Mkhize and Sibanda, "Gender Disparities in Leadership in South African Early Childhood Education."

authority within institutions.<sup>17</sup> Together, these studies demonstrate that socio-cultural barriers operate at both structural and personal levels.

The literature also reveals that community perceptions significantly shape leadership acceptance in rural settings. Dyantyi argues that women who challenge traditional gender expectations may experience resistance or social stigma.<sup>18</sup> Although this finding aligns with the global literature on patriarchal societies, it also highlights the specific realities of rural South African communities where traditional authority structures remain influential. This demonstrates that leadership challenges cannot be separated from broader cultural and community dynamics.

A recurring theme in studies is the importance of mentorship and role modelling. Sikhwari argues that female role models foster leadership aspirations and offer practical guidance for navigating institutional barriers.<sup>19</sup> However, Acker cautions that mentorship alone cannot dismantle entrenched gender inequalities if institutional cultures remain male-dominated.<sup>20</sup> This reflects a broader tension within the literature about whether individual empowerment strategies are sufficient without systemic institutional reform.

Although many studies recommend leadership training and awareness programmes, the literature suggests that interventions often focus more on preparing women to adapt to existing systems rather than transforming the unequal structures themselves. Consequently, scholars are increasingly advocating for approaches that challenge patriarchal assumptions within both communities and institutions.

### **Institutional Practices and Policies Affecting Gender Representation in ECE Leadership**

The literature demonstrates that institutional practices significantly influence gender representation in ECE leadership. Acker argues that educational institutions often reproduce societal gender inequalities by privileging male leadership styles and maintaining male-dominated administrative structures.<sup>21</sup> This perspective is reinforced by Sikhwari, who notes that many institutions lack formal gender-responsive policies to ensure equitable recruitment, promotion, and professional development.<sup>22</sup>

While scholars agree that institutional systems contribute to inequality, they differ regarding the extent to which policy reform alone can resolve the problem. Morley argues that transparent promotion procedures, gender audits, and affirmative action policies can improve women's representation in leadership.<sup>23</sup> However, Dyantyi suggests that policy reforms may have a limited impact if institutional cultures continue to privilege male authority and marginalise collaborative leadership approaches often associated with women.<sup>24</sup> This comparison reveals that policy implementation without cultural transformation may produce only superficial change.

The literature also critiques unequal access to professional development opportunities. Mkhize and Sibanda argue that women are frequently excluded from leadership workshops and mentorship programmes due to assumptions about their domestic responsibilities or limited leadership potential.<sup>25</sup> Such exclusion perpetuates cycles of underrepresentation by restricting women's preparedness for leadership positions. Importantly, these findings challenge merit-based assumptions often used to justify leadership appointments, revealing how institutional bias shapes access to opportunities.

Another important issue emerging from the literature is the undervaluation of women's leadership styles. Dyantyi argues that collaborative and participatory leadership approaches are often perceived as weaker than authoritative leadership styles traditionally associated with men.<sup>26</sup> This

<sup>17</sup> Morley, *Women and Educational Leadership: Challenges and Opportunities*.

<sup>18</sup> Dyantyi, "Crossing the Bridge to Leadership: A South African Experience of Female Principals to Secondary School Leadership."

<sup>19</sup> Sikhwari, "Gender Disparities in Educational Wastage: Analysing the Factors Contributing to Female Dropout Rates in Rural South Africa."

<sup>20</sup> Acker, *Gendered Organizations and the Dynamics of Inequality in Education*.

<sup>21</sup> Acker, *Gendered Organizations and the Dynamics of Inequality in Education*.

<sup>22</sup> Sikhwari, "Gender Disparities in Educational Wastage: Analysing the Factors Contributing to Female Dropout Rates in Rural South Africa."

<sup>23</sup> Morley, *Women and Educational Leadership: Challenges and Opportunities*.

<sup>24</sup> Dyantyi, "Crossing the Bridge to Leadership: A South African Experience of Female Principals to Secondary School Leadership."

<sup>25</sup> Mkhize and Sibanda, "Gender Disparities in Leadership in South African Early Childhood Education."

<sup>26</sup> Dyantyi, "Crossing the Bridge to Leadership: A South African Experience of Female Principals to Secondary School Leadership."

suggests that institutional cultures may privilege masculine leadership norms while devaluing alternative approaches that could improve inclusivity and organisational effectiveness.

Overall, the literature indicates that institutional inequalities are sustained not only through formal policies but also through organisational cultures, informal practices, and leadership perceptions. Consequently, achieving gender equity requires both structural reforms and shifts in institutional attitudes toward leadership and authority.

The reviewed literature demonstrates that gender disparities in ECE leadership are shaped by the interaction of socio-cultural norms, institutional practices, and policy limitations. Although scholars agree that women remain underrepresented in leadership despite dominating the ECE workforce, debates persist regarding whether cultural beliefs or institutional systems constitute the primary barrier to equity. The literature further reveals that mentorship, leadership development, and gender-responsive policies can promote women's advancement, yet these interventions may remain ineffective without broader cultural transformation. Importantly, limited research has examined how these dynamics operate specifically within rural ECE contexts such as the Vhembe District. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by exploring how gender representation in leadership is experienced, negotiated, and shaped within rural South African ECE centres.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in Feminist Theory, which provides a critical lens for examining how power structures, social norms, and institutional practices shape gender roles and influence access to leadership positions. Feminist Theory emphasises that systemic inequalities, cultural expectations, and organisational structures often limit women's participation in decision-making and governance, even in professions where women form the majority, such as early childhood education.<sup>27</sup> By focusing on these dynamics, Feminist Theory enables the researcher to explore how socio-cultural perceptions, institutional policies, and leadership practices collectively affect women's representation in leadership roles in rural ECE centres.

Feminist Theory is particularly suitable for this study because it highlights the interaction between individual agency and structural constraints, enabling an in-depth understanding of both the barriers and opportunities for women aspiring to leadership roles.<sup>28</sup> The theory underlines the importance of empowerment, equitable participation, and challenging traditional hierarchies that favour men in leadership, making it an ideal framework for analysing how gendered expectations in rural South African contexts shape ECE leadership. For instance, the underrepresentation of women in managerial positions, despite their predominance as educators, reflects broader societal and institutional power imbalances that Feminist Theory seeks to address.<sup>29</sup>

By applying Feminist Theory, this study can critically examine not only the numerical representation of women and men in leadership roles but also the qualitative impact of leadership diversity on institutional culture, staff support, and educational outcomes. It enables the identification of strategies that promote equitable access to leadership, such as mentorship, leadership development programmes, and policy reforms, which can dismantle structural barriers and empower women to participate fully in decision-making. Consequently, Feminist Theory aligns with the study's aim of exploring gender representation in leadership and provides a robust conceptual framework for interpreting findings and proposing practical interventions to enhance gender equity in ECE leadership contexts.

## CONCEPTUALISING GENDER REPRESENTATION

In the context of ECE, gender representation refers to the proportion, visibility, and participation of men and women in leadership roles within educational institutions. It encompasses equitable access to decision-making positions, influence over institutional policies, and the ability to shape educational

<sup>27</sup> Acker, *Gendered Organizations and the Dynamics of Inequality in Education*.

<sup>28</sup> Morley, *Women and Educational Leadership: Challenges and Opportunities*.

<sup>29</sup> Mkhize and Sibanda, "Gender Disparities in Leadership in South African Early Childhood Education."

practices and learner outcomes.<sup>30</sup> Gender representation is not solely a numerical measure; it also reflects how cultural norms, organizational structures, and professional hierarchies facilitate or hinder women's participation in leadership.<sup>31</sup>

Research indicates that despite women forming the majority of ECE practitioners globally, leadership roles are often disproportionately occupied by men due to systemic barriers such as gendered expectations, socio-cultural norms, and limited professional development opportunities for women. The concept further captures the interplay between institutional policies, mentorship, and empowerment initiatives that can either reinforce or challenge existing gender disparities.<sup>32</sup> In ECE, gender representation directly affects leadership styles, staff support mechanisms, and the implementation of inclusive pedagogical practices, which in turn influence overall educational outcomes.

This concept is particularly suitable for this study, as it provides a lens for exploring and analysing the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions within rural ECE centres in the Vhembe District. By focusing on gender representation, the study can identify barriers, examine opportunities for equitable participation, and propose strategies to enhance women's leadership presence in educational governance. It aligns with the study's aim and objectives by connecting the structural, cultural, and institutional factors that shape leadership dynamics to the lived experiences of educators who aspire to or occupy leadership roles.

## METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative research approach to explore gender representation in leadership roles within ECE centres in the Vhembe District, Limpopo Province. A qualitative design was deemed appropriate because it allows for an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of leadership dynamics of the participants, particularly within a socio-cultural and institutional context.<sup>33</sup> The study was situated within a critical interpretivist paradigm, which focuses on understanding social phenomena through participants' perspectives while acknowledging the influence of broader societal power structures and inequalities.<sup>34</sup> This paradigm aligns with the study's aim of examining how gendered expectations, institutional practices, and cultural norms shape leadership opportunities for women in ECE.

A case study research design was adopted, as it allows for a detailed, contextually rich exploration of specific phenomena in real-life settings.<sup>35</sup> The case study focused on rural ECE centres in the Vhembe District, selected due to their representation of typical challenges and gender dynamics in South African rural educational contexts. This design facilitated the collection of rich and nuanced data on the factors that influence gender representation in leadership, including barriers, opportunities, and strategies to promote equity.

The study population comprised ECE practitioners and school administrators working in rural centres. Purposive sampling was used to select 20 participants who were either currently holding leadership positions or aspiring to them. This sampling strategy was chosen to ensure that the participants had relevant experience and insights into leadership practices, gendered challenges, and institutional dynamics.<sup>36</sup> The sample included both male and female educators to capture diverse perspectives on leadership distribution, barriers, and institutional practices.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to express their experiences and perceptions freely while enabling the researcher to probe for more detailed explanations where necessary. Interviews focused on participants' leadership experiences, perceptions of gender equity, barriers to leadership, and recommendations for promoting equitable representation. Each

<sup>30</sup> Acker, *Gendered Organizations and the Dynamics of Inequality in Education*; Mkhize and Sibanda, "Gender Disparities in Leadership in South African Early Childhood Education."

<sup>31</sup> Morley, *Women and Educational Leadership: Challenges and Opportunities*.

<sup>32</sup> John W Creswell and Cheryl N Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (Sage publications, 2016).

<sup>33</sup> Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*.

<sup>34</sup> Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 5th ed. ( Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2018).

<sup>35</sup> Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* ( Sage Publications, 2018).

<sup>36</sup> Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2015).

interview was audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, following Braun et al.'s six-phase process of familiarization, coding, theme generation, review, definition, and reporting.<sup>37</sup> This method allowed the identification of patterns, relationships, and emerging themes related to gender representation, barriers, and opportunities in leadership. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, thick description, and peer debriefing, enhancing the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, ensuring voluntary participation, maintaining confidentiality, and securing institutional ethical approval before data collection.

This methodology was suitable for the study because it provided a rigorous, systematic framework for exploring complex socio-cultural and institutional dynamics that affect gender representation in leadership. By prioritising participants' voices and contextual realities, the study captured the nuanced ways in which gender norms, organisational policies, and personal aspirations intersect to influence leadership pathways in rural ECE centres.

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the key findings of the study on gender representation in leadership roles in early childhood education. The findings are organised into four themes that emerged from the data analysis. These themes reflect the experiences and perceptions of participants about gendered leadership practices within rural ECE centres. The discussion is framed within Feminist Theory and supported by relevant literature.

### Theme 1: Gender Distribution in Leadership Roles

The findings revealed a pronounced gender imbalance in leadership positions across ECE centres in the Vhembe District. Although women make up the majority of the teaching workforce, leadership roles, including centre directors, coordinators, and administrative heads, are predominantly held by men. This trend aligns with global studies that highlight the paradoxical phenomenon that female-majority professions are led primarily by men.<sup>38</sup> The persistence of this disparity suggests that leadership roles are not only a reflection of individual competencies but also socially constructed positions shaped by gendered norms.

One male participant reflected the prevailing structural preference for male leadership: *"In our centre, men are often appointed as principals or coordinators. Even though women handle most of the classroom work, leadership roles usually go to male colleagues."*

A female participant also shared her experience of repeated exclusion:

*"I have applied for leadership roles several times, but the committee often chooses male teachers, saying they are more 'authoritative' and can handle management better."*

These testimonies indicate that leadership selection is often influenced by societal perceptions associating authority with masculinity rather than merit or experience. Feminist Theory provides a critical framework for interpreting these findings, highlighting how patriarchal structures privilege men in decision-making positions and reinforce power asymmetries in educational institutions.<sup>39</sup> According to this perspective, leadership hierarchies are embedded in historical and social constructs that position men as natural leaders and women as subordinates or caregivers.

Community perceptions further exacerbate this imbalance. In rural settings, leadership is often viewed through a cultural lens that positions men as the primary decision-makers, while women are expected to focus on caregiving roles both in the home and in the classroom. One female participant explained:

<sup>37</sup> Virginia Braun et al., "Thematic Analysis," in *Handbook of Research Methods in Health Social Sciences* (Springer, 2019), 843–60.

<sup>38</sup> Acker, *Gendered Organizations and the Dynamics of Inequality in Education*; Morley, *Women and Educational Leadership: Challenges and Opportunities*.

<sup>39</sup> Acker, *Gendered Organizations and the Dynamics of Inequality in Education*.



*"People in the community expect men to lead and make decisions. Women are expected to teach and manage children, not to sit in offices or make policy decisions."*

These social expectations echo findings of Mkhize and Sibanda, who reported that male dominance in leadership persists even in sectors where women outnumber men.<sup>40</sup> Morley similarly emphasizes that gendered leadership hierarchies constrain women's access to decision-making roles, limiting the transformative potential of female leadership in educational settings.<sup>41</sup>

The implications of these findings are far-reaching. Male-dominated leadership can influence curriculum decisions, staff development, and institutional governance, potentially marginalizing collaborative and inclusive pedagogical practices. Female leaders, on the contrary, often promote participatory decision-making and teacher mentorship, highlighting the importance of gender diversity in leadership. The study suggests that the intersection of social norms, historical organizational practices, and patriarchal values collectively maintains male dominance in leadership roles, thereby shaping institutional culture and limiting equitable representation in ECE governance.

## **Theme 2: Barriers to Women's Leadership**

The study identified multiple barriers that impede women's access to leadership positions in rural ECE centres. These barriers are both socio-cultural and institutional, including entrenched gender norms, family responsibilities, lack of mentorship, and biased professional development opportunities. Participants described experiencing subtle discrimination, undervaluation of their leadership potential, and exclusion from decision-making processes.

A female teacher recounted her experience:

*"Even though we teach most of the children, men are often chosen as principals; it feels like our efforts are overlooked."*

Cultural expectations emerged as a significant deterrent. One participant noted:

*"In our community, women are expected to take care of the home and family first. Leadership roles are considered a man's job, so many women do not even try to apply."*

These narratives illustrate how societal gender constructs shape career trajectories. Feminist Theory interprets these barriers as manifestations of structural inequalities embedded within socio-cultural and institutional contexts.<sup>42</sup> By privileging male authority and reinforcing stereotypical gender roles, the system restricts women's participation in leadership, rendering leadership not merely an individual achievement but a socially mediated process constrained by historical and cultural norms.

Institutional practices further exacerbate these challenges. Participants noted that professional development workshops and training programmes are often scheduled without taking into account the caregiving responsibilities of women, effectively limiting access. Mentorship opportunities were reported to be scarce, particularly from female leaders, creating a gap in guidance and support. A participant emphasized:

*"There are hardly any female leaders to guide and mentor us. Most mentorship comes from male leaders, who may not understand the challenges women face."*

These findings are consistent with the views of other scholars, who document that systemic barriers, including the scarcity of mentorship, gendered workplace cultures, and biased recruitment processes, significantly hinder women's advancement in leadership in education.<sup>43</sup> The cumulative effect is a cycle of underrepresentation, where women are excluded from decision-making, and institutional leadership remains male-dominated.

<sup>40</sup> Mkhize and Sibanda, "Gender Disparities in Leadership in South African Early Childhood Education."

<sup>41</sup> Morley, *Women and Educational Leadership: Challenges and Opportunities*.

<sup>42</sup> Acker, *Gendered Organizations and the Dynamics of Inequality in Education*.

<sup>43</sup> Morley, *Women and Educational Leadership: Challenges and Opportunities*; Mkhize and Sibanda, "Gender Disparities in Leadership in South African Early Childhood Education."

Another critical barrier is internalized gender norms that influence women's self-perception and confidence. Some participants indicated that they voluntarily abstain from applying for leadership roles due to anticipated rejection or bias, a phenomenon commonly called the "confidence gap." This internalization reflects the deep-rooted influence of societal expectations, perpetuating gendered inequities even when formal opportunities exist.

Theme 2 highlights the complex, multi-dimensional barriers women encounter in pursuing leadership roles. Applying Feminist Theory illuminates how socio-cultural expectations, institutional practices, and structural inequalities converge to limit women's leadership opportunities. Addressing these barriers requires deliberate interventions, including gender-sensitive policies, mentorship programmes, leadership training, and initiatives that challenge cultural stereotypes and foster equitable pathways for female educators in ECE leadership.

### **Theme 3: Impact on Educational Practices**

The study revealed that gender representation in leadership significantly influences educational practices and institutional culture within ECE centres. Participants highlighted that male and female leaders often approach leadership differently, affecting curriculum implementation, staff support, and learner engagement. Female leaders were perceived as emphasizing collaboration, teacher development, and inclusive educational practices, while male leaders were often described as focusing on administrative efficiency and procedural compliance. This observation aligns with Feminist Theory, which posits that leadership styles and institutional decision-making are shaped by socially constructed gender norms, resulting in differential approaches to management and pedagogy.<sup>44</sup>

One participant, a female teacher aspiring to a leadership position, noted:

*"When women lead, we see more attention to inclusive activities and teacher development. We prioritize mentorship and ensure that each child's needs are addressed."*

Conversely, a male participant reflected on his leadership style:

*"As a coordinator, I focus on meeting targets and ensuring that administrative duties are completed. I do not have the same time to mentor staff individually."*

These contrasting approaches underscore how the underrepresentation of women in leadership can shape the learning environment and institutional culture. Feminist Theory suggests that diverse leadership fosters participatory decision-making and inclusive practices, contributing to more holistic educational outcomes.<sup>45</sup> In contexts where male leaders predominate, emphasis may inadvertently shift toward procedural compliance, potentially neglecting pedagogical innovation and teacher support.

Moreover, participants reported that gendered leadership also impacts staff morale and motivation. Female educators expressed greater satisfaction and engagement when led by women, citing improved communication, empathy, and responsiveness to teachers' challenges. As one participant explained:

*"Female leaders understand the challenges of balancing work and family. They are more approachable and consider our opinions when making decisions."*

This finding aligns with Mkhize and Sibanda, who assert that gender-sensitive leadership enhances institutional culture by promoting collaboration, inclusivity, and responsiveness to staff and learner needs.<sup>46</sup> The study suggests that increasing women's representation in leadership can contribute not only to equity but also to improved educational outcomes and organisational effectiveness within ECE centres.

<sup>44</sup> Acker, *Gendered Organizations and the Dynamics of Inequality in Education*.

<sup>45</sup> Morley, *Women and Educational Leadership: Challenges and Opportunities*.

<sup>46</sup> Mkhize and Sibanda, "Gender Disparities in Leadership in South African Early Childhood Education."

#### Theme 4: Opportunities and Strategies for Equity

Participants identified multiple opportunities and strategies to promote equitable gender representation in leadership within rural ECE centres. Mentorship, leadership training, affirmative policies, and community sensitization emerged as critical interventions to address structural and socio-cultural barriers. The findings emphasize that systemic transformation requires both institutional reform and targeted empowerment initiatives, consistent with Feminist Theory's focus on challenging patriarchal norms and enabling women's participation in decision-making.<sup>47</sup>

A school administrator highlighted the importance of structured programmes: *"We need formal programmes to empower women and challenge the traditional expectations that keep them from leading. Leadership workshops and mentorship opportunities could make a real difference."*

Several participants underscored the role of mentorship as a key enabler. Female educators indicated that having role models and guidance from experienced leaders can build confidence, improve skills, and encourage applications for leadership roles. A participant stated: *"Mentorship is crucial. Seeing women in leadership positions and being guided by them gives us the courage to apply and perform confidently."*

Community engagement was also emphasized as a strategy to shift socio-cultural perceptions. Participants suggested that sensitizing communities about the benefits of women's leadership could challenge traditional norms that associate authority with masculinity. One female participant remarked: *"We need to involve parents and community leaders in conversations about women leading schools. If the community supports us, it becomes easier to occupy leadership positions."*

Institutional strategies included the establishment of gender-sensitive policies that explicitly promote women's participation in leadership. Examples cited by participants included transparent recruitment procedures, equal access to professional development, and structured succession planning to create equitable pathways for women.

These strategies resonate with the existing literature, which emphasizes that targeted interventions, such as leadership development programmes, mentorship networks, and affirmative policies, can mitigate structural and socio-cultural barriers, fostering equitable representation.<sup>48</sup> By implementing these approaches, rural ECE centres can cultivate inclusive leadership, enhance teacher development, and improve institutional governance, ultimately benefiting learners' educational experiences.

Theme 4 demonstrates that while barriers to women's leadership are pervasive, deliberate interventions grounded in Feminist Theory can create opportunities for equity. Mentorship, policy reforms, professional development, and community sensitization collectively provide mechanisms to challenge patriarchal structures, promote women's leadership, and strengthen the effectiveness and inclusivity of ECE governance.

The findings demonstrate that gender representation in ECE leadership remains deeply influenced by socio-cultural norms and institutional practices. Male dominance in leadership roles continues to marginalise women's participation despite their numerical majority in the profession. The themes highlight the interconnectedness of gender imbalance, leadership barriers, and educational practices. Overall, the study underscores the need for deliberate strategies to promote equitable and inclusive leadership in ECE contexts.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study's findings, several targeted recommendations are proposed to address the gender imbalance in leadership within rural ECE centres in the Vhembe District. First, leadership development

<sup>47</sup> Acker, *Gendered Organizations and the Dynamics of Inequality in Education*; Morley, *Women and Educational Leadership: Challenges and Opportunities*.

<sup>48</sup> Mkhize and Sibanda, "Gender Disparities in Leadership in South African Early Childhood Education"; Morley, *Women and Educational Leadership: Challenges and Opportunities*.

programmes for female educators should be implemented, focusing on administrative management, curriculum oversight, and strategic decision-making. Such programmes would build confidence and equip women with the skills necessary to navigate leadership roles.

Second, it is essential to establish mentorship and peer support networks. Aspiring female leaders must be paired with experienced mentors, both female and supportive male leaders, to provide guidance, share experiences, and advocate for their progression.

Third, institutional policies must actively promote gender equity in leadership, including transparent recruitment and promotion criteria and gender-sensitivity training for selection committees. Policies could also include targets for female representation in managerial positions to ensure equitable opportunities.

Lastly, community engagement and flexible professional development are critical. Sensitising communities about the benefits of female leadership and providing training sessions that accommodate women's family responsibilities can reduce socio-cultural and logistical barriers. Implementing these recommendations will empower women, challenge entrenched gender norms, and strengthen leadership in rural ECE centres, ultimately enhancing institutional governance, staff development, and learner outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that gender representation in leadership within ECE in the Vhembe District remains highly imbalanced, with men disproportionately occupying leadership roles despite women making up the majority of practitioners. The findings reveal that socio-cultural norms, entrenched stereotypes, and institutional practices continue to hinder women's access to leadership opportunities. Feminist Theory provided a valuable framework for understanding how power structures and gendered expectations shape the career trajectories of female educators, reinforcing systemic inequalities within rural educational contexts.

The study also highlighted that when women do occupy leadership roles, they often bring more inclusive, collaborative, and child-centred approaches to governance and decision-making, positively influencing both educators and learners. However, the persistence of cultural expectations that confine women to domestic and caregiving responsibilities limits their availability for such positions. The lack of mentorship and structured leadership development further exacerbates this underrepresentation.

Addressing these disparities requires intentional action, including leadership training tailored for women, mentorship structures, and gender-sensitive institutional policies. Community sensitization is also crucial, as societal acceptance of women in leadership can reduce resistance and empower female educators to pursue leadership roles with confidence. Ultimately, equitable gender representation in leadership is not only a matter of social justice but also a strategic investment in strengthening ECE governance, improving teacher support, and improving learner outcomes in rural South Africa.

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