

Hindrances that woman face gaining access to primary school leadership positions in Kenya. The case of Rongai District, Rift Valley Province.

Tikoko Betty Jeruto^{1*} (corresponding author) Dr Catherine Jematia Kiprop^{*1}

¹Lecturer, Department of Education, Kabarak University, Kenya . Email: talaitikoko@gmail.com.
Tel: 0726287066. Postal address: Kabarak University, P.O Private Bag-Kabarak. Nakuru, Kenya.

²Lecturer, Department of Education Management and Policy Studies, Moi University, Kenya..Email: catekiprop@yahoo.com.Tel: 0722283509. Postal Address: PO Box 3900, Eldoret.

ABSTRACT

The research problem that this study investigated was the factors that hinder female teachers from advancing into leadership positions in primary schools in Rongai District. Qualitative research design was adopted for this study. Data was collected by means of face to face interviews and structured researcher -administered questionnaires. The sample comprised of ten long serving female teachers serving in senior positions in primary schools. The findings revealed that though the female teachers were interested in heading schools, various external and internal factors hindered them from ascending into these positions. All female teachers were therefore still classroom teachers. A complex mix of obstacles barred women from career advancement. These included family responsibilities, cultural and gender stereotypes, and low self esteem among women propagated mainly through socialization processes that placed women in the position of the 'led' rather than the 'leaders'.

Key words: women, leadership positions, primary schools, hindrances

INTRODUCTION

In Kenya there have been some debates on women and leadership which led to the development of policies intended to increase women's participation in decision making positions especially in public service. Specifically, the Kenyan government has put in place legislative measures prohibiting discrimination of women in employment. Mwatha (2010) outlines these measures as- the Employment Act, No11 of 2007 which prohibits discrimination in access to employment security on the basis of sex among others. The Presidential Directive of 2006 on 30% women appointments to all positions of leadership is also one more government initiative aimed at institutionalizing gender issues in the country. However, it has not been clearly established why under-representation of women in leadership positions in general and primary school management in particular, still persists.

Further and following the above mentioned legal reforms to advance the cause of women and to bridge the gender gap, many policies have been put in place to advance gender equality. The

National Policy on Gender and Development (2000), The Policy of Education for All are cases in point. In 2004, the Kenyan Government further established the Ministry of Gender. The women's bureau within the Ministry was upgraded in status to a department with the broad objective of ensuring equality of opportunity for women in the development process. A national Commission on Gender and Development (NCGD) was also established in December 2004 with the mandate to promote gender mainstreaming as a policy for government institutions and the incorporation of gender perspectives into all areas of development (Muteshi, 2006).

These enactments had varying impact at different levels of the education system. Based on primary net enrolment/ attendance ratios following the implementation of 2003 Free Primary Education, Kenya had achieved 100% enrolment at primary level for both boys and girls (Tikoko, 2007). Though significant gains have been made at primary level where near parity has been achieved in female and male enrolment, women are still significantly under represented at secondary and post secondary level and training. Among the major constrains impinging on further gains for women in education are the limited number of secondary schools for girls and low participation of girls and women in science and technical education at both secondary and post secondary levels (Waruhiu *et al*, 2010). Onsongo (2004) further points out that increasing competition at higher levels of education marginalizes women in the courses that they take in that given curriculum choices, girls tend to select subjects that conform to the cultural image and not necessarily to their aptitude and scholastic ability.

Gender disparities also abound in the formal employment sector. To illustrate this point, Ellis *et al*, (2007) points out that though the Kenyan constitution seems to provide for gender equality, there seems to be exceptions to the equality provisions one of which is that non discrimination does not apply to a statute that prescribes standards regarding appointment to public office, in a disciplined force, in local authority service, or in the public body corporate. In the area of educational management, women remained glaringly under-represented. For example, there are far fewer women heads than men in Kenyan primary schools despite the fact that they form the majority in as far as total staff enrolment is concerned. The Royal Netherlands Embassy (1994) adds that even where women outnumber men on the teaching staff, they are a minority among school principals and heads of departments. They add that within institutions of higher education, relatively few women hold professional or administrative ranks. ADB (2007) adds that even though women form more than half the population of Kenya, they are underrepresented in leadership and decision making positions. It would therefore appear that there are many serious challenges facing women with leadership ambitions, even though many initiatives and projects seek to promote female leaders.

The problem of gender inequality in education management has been examined at various levels by researchers. However, many of these studies have been based in developed countries such as the USA and the UK. Moreover, many have been explanatory in nature; focusing chiefly in offering explanations to account for the low representation of women in leadership positions in education institutions. Among these are cultural scripts that identify feminine attributes as contributing to ineffective leadership (Al-Khalifa and Migniuolos, 1990; Blackmore, 1999; Curry, 2000), latent discrimination (Coleman, 2002). Another explanation offered to explain the paucity of female primary school administrators is male dominance in educational administration, which, in turn,

hinders the leadership opportunities of many women (Limerick and Anderson, 1999; Shakeshaft 1989). For example, male dominance of key leadership positions is likely to lead to recruiting new principals who resemble their sponsors in attitude, philosophy, actions and appearance, hobbies, club membership, that is, men (Hill and Ragland, 1995). Though valid, these studies have been done in developed nations and this may affect the validity of such explanations in developing nation such as Kenya with differing cultural, economic and legal environments.

From the foregoing therefore, it would seem that women's rights to employment and subsequent career advancement are guaranteed -at least on paper- by means of enabling legislative frameworks. Kamau (2010) notes that after two and a half decades of gender activism, gender sensitization, capacity building, lobbying and mobilizing Kenya women to take up various political leadership positions, civic, gender and human rights awareness has remarkably improved, alongside strategies for policy and advocacy interventions. She adds that policy makers have also mastered the gender language and can rhetorically articulate gender equality principles.

By contrast however, as of July 2011, there were 21 primary school head teachers in Rongai District but of this figure, none was female. Moreover, none of the primary schools was deputized by a female teacher. From the statistics obtained from the Rongai District Education office, the total staff establishment stood at 201 out of which there were 102 (51 %) female teachers. This presents an unequal distribution of leadership positions in that though female teachers were more than male teachers in the schools, none of them headed any of the primary schools in the district. These figures suggest that though the government initiated Affirmative Action in 2006 intended to create equity in employment of men and women and promotion to senior positions in the public sector, this has failed to trickle down to education leadership at primary school level.

It is against this background that this study investigated the impediments facing female teachers in primary schools in their quest for promotion to headship positions in the said schools. More specifically the study was guided by the following research questions:

- i) What barriers impede female teachers' advancement to primary school headship positions?

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized qualitative study techniques of the interview. A sample of 10 female school teachers was drawn from a population of 102. This satisfied criteria set out by Gay and Ariasan (2003) that for descriptive studies such as this, it is common to sample 10 to 20% of the population. Peter (1994) also considers 11% to be representative of the population. In light of these assertions the sample of 10 was calculated. Permission to conduct the research in Rongai District was obtained from the Rift Valley Provincial Director of Education in which Rongai District falls. A list of teachers was obtained from the Rongai District Education Office and thereafter, by means of random sampling procedure, ten female teachers were selected. The female teachers selected were interviewed using a researcher administered structured interview schedule. Data thus obtained was analyzed into themes and conclusions drawn.

FINDINGS

In an attempt to establish the barriers to women advancement to leadership positions in primary schools in Kenya, a number of themes emerged: Cultural Barriers, low self esteem, family responsibilities, Dismissive Attitudes against women, lack of ambitions among female teachers

and competition from male colleagues. This section presents the discussions of these themes in detail.

Cultural Barriers to Female Teachers Advancement to Headship in Primary Schools.

Cultural barriers were found to be the dominant barrier to advancement of women into headship positions in primary schools. As Singleton (1993) rightly points out, in the area of educational management attitudes and perceptions, "Somehow people assume that men possess the necessary qualities to do the job and this only changes when they demonstrate otherwise, but with women have to prove over and over again that we can do the job before their abilities are recognized. Quite simply, educational management is considered a "male" job, not only by society in general but also by teachers and even pupils. Research evidence confirms that pupils hold a preconception that effectiveness of the school is increased by having a male as Head teacher, who tolerates less "mucking about" (Stanworth, 1984).

All interview participants were of the view that the strongly held view by members of their society that leadership belongs to men has greatly affected their chances of promotion into leadership positions in their society. One put it in the following manner:

Society has myths that ladies may not provide strong leadership. There are many qualified ladies in our rank; some of whom are pursuing degree courses in the university but no leadership position has been offered to them. Society is very dismissive towards ladies- that men can do the job better.

The above view suggests that attitudes in the society contribute largely towards women marginalization in the leadership equation. The participants felt that this was unfair and discriminatory since ladies

... had not been given the chance to prove themselves so that they can have a basis for discrimination. In fact ladies do a good job. We are equal to the task. We are better managers than men since we bring in the human touch to administration. Men tend to make rash decisions but ladies tend to be fair to all sides. They are more democratic and listen to all before making up their minds. This may be seen to be a weakness but at the end better management is realized.

From the above it can be realized that though the society may look down on women and their leadership capabilities, female teachers themselves felt that they were quite capable of taking up the leadership mantle if only they were given a chance. An interesting comparison between leadership styles of men and women was raised whereby it emerged that women even felt that they were better than their male colleagues in leadership.

It was further found out that certain cultural practices could be blamed for the dominance of men in headship positions in schools. In making her observations, an interview respondent agreed that cultural stereotyping of gender roles has been the prime barrier to female teachers advancement. Going further however, she explained this occurrence as follows:

Society looks down on women. The society sends the message that men can lead and women cannot do that. Circumcision affects this reasoning. A man who is circumcised believes a

woman cannot lead and stand before a man. Men don't expect women to 'grow horns' and expect to lead a school. This idea is beyond imagination especially in a situation where the lady is expected to sit in management committees in schools with local leaders such as the chief, village elders and other opinion shapers of the society. This makes her afraid and shy away from headship. She thinks I am not fit to be in the same circles as these leaders.

The above view thus confirms that women are indeed faced with insurmountable cultural barriers in their attempt to climb the career ladder in education leadership. In support of the above views, interview respondents were of the view that the failure of the society to admit female into leadership positions in primary schools could be traced to upbringing in the Kenyan society. Opined one interview respondent:

Ladies have been psychologically suppressed since childhood. This is really a matter of environment of the Kenyan society where a girl has always observed leadership from the male perspective. Right from the home she is told that the father is the head of the home. This continues even to national level where the president has always been male. This has an impact on her psych such that when you talk about leadership even at school level male dominance continues because ladies shy away from these positions.

All women's beliefs stated above about female stereotyping agrees with Grace's (1995) study that explored the role of gender expectation in society. Grace believes patriarchal and male power has shaped the construct of leadership, its culture, discourse, imaging and practice for centuries. Hymowitz (2006) also argues that due to the way they are socialized, women just assume that they cannot operate in the so-called male territories. Worse still, they make these assumptions without even bothering to find out what the roles entail.

FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES

The study found that strong family responsibilities weighed women down and became obstacles in their attempt to ascend into primary school leadership positions. Owing to women's strong attachment to family and their desire to be close to their husbands and children, women were reluctant to take up leadership in the primary schools they were posted. This was attributed to a belief that such positions would take them away from their families. Chabaya *et al* (2009) also found out that family attachment was the major reason why women teachers did not apply for school headship positions. Women were found not to be prepared to take up positions away from their husbands and children. In fact, given a choice between career advancement in places away from the family and staying with ones' family, most women appeared to prefer the latter.

One interview respondent aptly put it thus:

I suppose responsibilities at home are one of the issues affecting women. You know parenting lies more on the women than men. This begins from childbirth to actual raising of the children, you find women cannot upgrade their skills due to the demanding responsibilities at home which take up a lot of their time.

As can be gathered from the views highlighted above, family ties are the bane of women advancement to leadership positions in schools. These ties stem from the idea that women are the primary care givers at home.

Lack of support from family members also affects women with leadership ambitions in primary schools. From the discussions above, many women pointed accusing fingers at husbands who may discourage their wives from accepting leadership positions. This could be due to fear that once a woman has become a school headmistress, they may become 'bossy' at home and 'difficult to manage'. Men are also driven by 'inferiority complex that dictates to them their course of action i.e to keep women under them, suppressed and without voice'.

Conclusion

The foregoing has outlined the barriers that impede women's advancement into leadership positions in primary schools on Kenya. It has been established that though relevant legislation has been put in place by the Kenyan government (Republic of Kenya, 2006) to help women in developing their careers in the public sector, there are still barriers that prevent the achievement of gender parity in education administration. These hindrances can be categorized as external and internal barriers. External barriers refer to those impediments that stem from environmental factors which women have no control over. They include family responsibilities and cultural stereotypes that confine women in culturally defined roles. Internal factors such as low self esteem are within the control of women. It is thus recommended that women play an active role in their own advancement by applying for leadership positions in their schools, networking and encouraging other women to climb the career ladder.

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