Gender Transformation Experiences among Women Leaders in the Western Cape TVET Sector: A Narrative Response

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Abstract

Leadership structures in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges in South Africa face stark gender inequalities. Narratives of women currently in TVET leadership positions in the Western Cape province of South Africa might shed light on gender transformation in this sector. This article provides an insider perspective on 10 purposively selected respondents' shared experiences during their careers as women leaders through a narrative methodology. The data produced themes like family roles and a professional career balance, stages in becoming a leader, gender-related notions, leadership contexts, and strategies to manage gendered experiences. The analytical framework developed illustrates how these themes were reconciled with a structured method of narrative analysis, described as a problem-solution approach, analysing raw data for five elements of plot structure, namely characters, setting, problem, actions, and resolutions. Aligning the conceptual and analytical frameworks facilitated re-storying inside a plot-structured narrative. The results reported gender transformation progress regarding the career progression of women leaders. Conversely, progress concerning gender stereotyping and men-to-women and women-to-women discrimination was unsatisfactory, causing some respondents to abandon leadership ambitions. Although the small sample size precludes any claim to generalisability, the reported narratives serve as a guideline in addressing all-inclusive gender transformation in TVET college leadership.

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Introduction

> I'm not the woman president of Harvard, *I'm the president* of Harvard. (Drew Gilpin Faust, President, Harvard University)[1]

Promoting the cause of women in leadership has received attention internationally. In Canada (Beckton and Pouragheli 2013), Norway (Dlamini 2013), Spain, France, Iceland and the Netherlands (Pande and Ford 2011), the role of women in leadership has attracted attention through various initiatives such as gender quotas. In 2013, South Africa formalised gender quotas to comply with international commitments (RSA 2013). Yet, in 2015 a census of the Businesswomen's Association of South Africa indicated that women were still underrepresented in leadership positions such as, among others, chairpersons (9.2%) and directors (21.8%) (Oberholster 2015). Cabinet statistics reflected a more promising picture, although in 2015 women ministers still comprised only 41 per cent of Cabinet, with the same representation of women in the National Assembly (RSA 2015).

However, advances in gender transformation are not reflected in education internationally (Leathwood 2011; Walker 2013). Notwithstanding legislation and policy initiatives regarding gender equality, women in educational leadership positions are still underrepresented abroad (Moltz 2011) and in South Africa (DHET 2015). In higher education specifically, women still experience discrimination, often in subtle ways such as denying them a superior office (Blackmore 2005). The South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) Research Agenda (DHET 2014, 10) states that the higher education staff composition is still "racially skewed, with white male academics dominating key areas," and that the management of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges should be transformed (2014, 10). Historically, TVET colleges directly served sectors of industry connected to motor and diesel mechanics, building (including among others, plumbers, painters and electricians), refrigeration and tool making. Given that instructors were (and still are) frequently drawn from these sectors of industry, it is not surprising that staffing (and subsequently leaders) of the TVET colleges are predominantly male. Thus, TVET as an educational sector is particularly in need of greater gender transformation.

In addition, TVET colleges have not received adequate scholarly attention nationally (Asmal 2003; *City Press* 2012; Robertson 2015) and, likewise, scholarly international literature in this context is limited (McGrath 2005; Walker 2013). Moreover, Dlamini (2013) maintains that in-depth studies of South African women leaders' life stories are limited. Such studies can give women a voice and provide a richer source of information than is possible through merely statistical means. There is a need to uncover what may

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[1]   Drew Gilpin Faust, quoted by Jenny Soffel in her article "13 Quotes on Women and Work," published by *World Economic Forum* on March 8, 2016, available at https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/03/quotes-on-women-at-work/.

prevent women in TVET colleges from reaching top leadership positions. Presently, we do not know why women are not participating equally in TVET leadership.

This article provides a contextualised interpretation of gendered experiences of women in TVET leadership positions, and reports on what the narratives of black, coloured, Indian, and white women leaders in TVET colleges in the Western Cape province of South Africa tell us about gender transformation experiences (or the lack thereof) in this sector. The 10 respondent narratives reported here tell us about general experiences of women leaders in the TVET college sector in the Western Cape, how gender transformation affected their career progression, and what strategies they adopted to deal with gender-related issues. These storied accounts are reflected against a conceptual framework developed for this purpose.

Conceptual Framework

Gender-related notions, as well as leadership processes, contexts and styles may inhibit (or support) women's progression towards leadership. Some authors (Acker 2012, 423; Moorosi 2010, 560) promote a strategically planned career route with three different phases (learning, acquiring and performing leadership) to examine identified gender concerns, discrimination, and inequities. Women are increasingly sabotaged through bias and unfairly stereotyped selection criteria (Gouws 2008, 21), confronted with masculine hierarchies, and marginalised through the preservation of gender segregation as leaders in a male-dominated organisational culture—notions Acker (2012, 417) calls "the glass ceiling," and McNae and Vali (2015, 299) refer to as "the sticky floor."

In addition, Díaz García and Welter (2013, 384) argue that many women who are in leadership positions may be confronted with two conflicting discourses related to their professional career and family roles. Vinnicombe and Singh (2003, 325) contend that having a family could restrain women's career progression to the benefit of men. Gerzema and D'Antonio (2013 cited in Barao 2014, 9) add that the twofold burden of being a mother and a career woman may be taxing, leads to discrimination, and forces women to develop higher competencies than their male counterparts (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and Van Engen 2003, 584). Karanika-Murray et al. (2015, 69) confirm that such unrealistic workloads could eventually result in burn-out.

From the studied literature, it is evident that a theoretical gendered perspective on women in leadership is hard to delineate and scholars differ in their conceptualisation thereof (Haque 2011, 2–4; Nazar and Van der Heijden 2014, 69; Priola 2007, 23; Risman 2004, 433). The key themes and concepts that emerged from the literature were therefore scaffolded into a conceptual framework (see Figure 1) within which the respondents' narratives could be interpreted and understood.
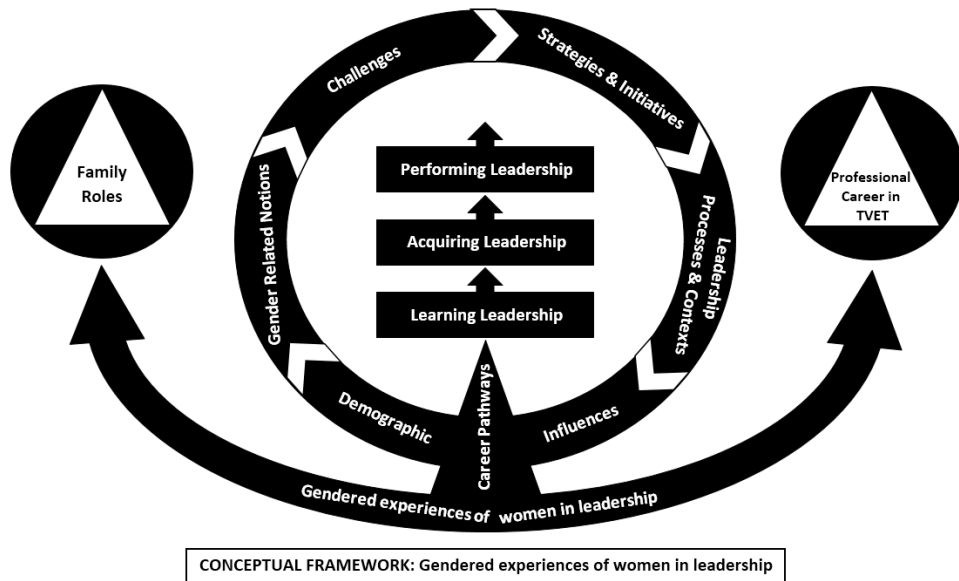
Figure 1: Framework for interpreting public TVET college women leaders' gendered experiences on their career pathways (adapted from Maritz 2013, 7)

According to Figure 1, the gendered experiences of women leaders in public vocational education are intrinsically connected with both a professional career in TVET and family roles—the two are mutually inclusive, and can be linked to different career pathways. Thus, the gendered experiences of female leaders may be influenced by the way in which they balance their family roles and their professional careers. Furthermore, these gendered experiences could emerge at any of the three different phases of their career paths, namely learning, acquiring, and performing leadership. Lastly, experiences could be influenced by demographics, gender-related notions, leadership processes and contexts, challenges, and strategies/initiatives to advance their careers. Although the proposed framework above presupposes possible outcomes, Walker (2013, 107) maintains that a heuristic framework imposes themes and trends within the narratives to assist in producing findings. In the following section, the research design and methodology underpinning the article are explained.

Research Design and Methodology

For the purpose of the study (Bonzet 2017) on which this article draws, an interpretive narrative approach was followed with unstructured interviews for data collection. Narrative studies illustrate individuals' ways of constructing and making sense of experience (Bruner 1991, 1). The reported study adopted an emic insider's approach (Johnson 2006, 242) and took place within a specific setting (Ollerenshaw and Creswell 2002, 329, 332). As narratives are co-constructive in nature, Pavlenko (2002, 214) differentiates between narrative inquiry (finding ideas ethnographically) and narrative

study (different perspectives leading to a narrative construction). In this case, the latter category—a study of women leaders' perspectives—was employed, focusing on second-order narratives (other people's encounters) as opposed to first-order narratives, where people tell stories about themselves (Creswell 2007, 119). Every attempt was made to adhere to narrative interview protocol; for example, no prompts were made (unless there was a clear coda) during the main narration. Only during the questioning phase and once the recording had been stopped were thoughtful questions asked (for example, "What happened then?") and neither opinion, attitude, "why" questions, arguing, nor contradictions were used to ensure optimal response (Jovchelovitch and Bauer 2000).

The "codus" operandi (Saldana 2013, 26, 175) was based on in vivo, descriptive, and colour coding or theming the data, as well as "priori" or "prefigured" coding (Creswell 2007, 152). Then, using narrative coding (Saldana 2013, 123), the interpreted data were placed in a narrative context called a problem-solution approach where data were analysed for five elements of plot structure (characters, setting, problem, actions, and resolutions) (Ollerenshaw and Creswell 2002, 330). Thus, data were merged with themes in the conceptual framework and illustrated graphically as events, after which sequencing of the events was done using alphabetical labelling to yield the analytical framework below. Next, the latter framework was directly aligned to the conceptual framework (as depicted in Figure 1 above). After this process, re-storying of the events was done, among others, by means of code weaving to be used as topic sentences for chunks of respondents' narratives (Saldana 2013, 248).

Ten purposively selected respondents' experiences were interpreted via the above-mentioned conceptual framework, and then re-storied within the bounds of a specific plot structure, illustrated in the aligned analytical framework in Figure 2 below. The respondents were women in TVET college leadership positions within the Western Cape province of South Africa.

PLOT STRUCTURE	Characters A	Setting B	Problem C	Action D	Resolution E
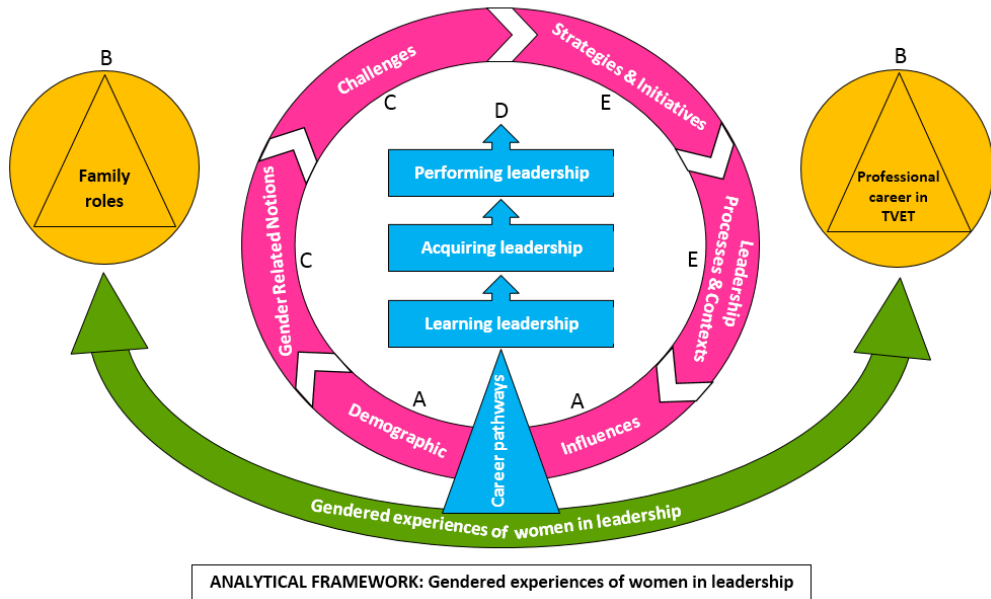
Figure 2: Analytical framework for interpreting and re-storying public TVET college women leaders' gendered experiences on their career pathways within the bounds of a plot structure (adapted from Maritz 2013, 7)

In Figure 2 five plot structure elements—characters (A), setting (B), problem (C), actions (D), and resolutions (E)—were aligned with the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1. Demographic influences moulded characters' (A) personalities in dealing with gendered experiences during their careers. Also, these experiences hinged on (and could be related to) both family roles and a professional career in TVET. Hence, women leaders' gendered experiences could have been influenced by the way in which they balance their family roles and their professional careers. This provided the setting (B). Along with the research question, the problem (C) comprised gender stereotyping and gender-related challenges. Penultimately, the action (D) arose through gendered experiences that could emerge during the different phases of their career paths. Lastly, strategies and initiatives, and leadership processes and contexts provided resolutions (E) to deal with gender-related issues.

To ensure the quality of the research, validation strategies such as critical reflective thinking, reflective conversations, and diary entries that leave an audit trail, were employed. An external auditor was used to verify the correctness of the process (Babbie and Mouton 2001, 278). Furthermore, trustworthiness was ensured by adhering to

methods that guarantee credibility (including prolonged engagement and reflexivity), transferability, and confirmability, providing rich and thick descriptions, applying rigour and avoiding bias (Babbie and Mouton 2001, 277; Creswell 2007, 202; Lincoln and Guba 1985, 112). Ethical matters were considered during the entire narrative interpretation process (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). Ethical clearance, institutional permission and informed consent were obtained where relevant before the onset of the reported study.

The next section reports on the constructed narrative (re-storying of women leaders' perspectives) that resulted from aligning my perspectives from the studied literature with the empirical results. Specific reference is given to the research questions—the general experiences of women leaders (characters) in the TVET college sector in the Western Cape (setting), how gender transformation affected their career progression (action), and what strategies and initiatives (resolution) they adopted to deal with gender-related issues (problem).

Results and Discussion Embodied in the Constructed Narrative

Gender transformation in TVET colleges was a process that only formally started with the passing of the FET Colleges Amendment Act No. 3 of 2012 (RSA 2012) and formalised by the White Paper in 2013 (DHET 2013) addressing, among other matters, gender inequality. TVET colleges subsequently had to design a gender equity plan, renew the plan annually, and submit the plan to their respective college councils for approval. Against this background the interpreted data were placed in a narrative context by applying the analytical framework—with the five alphabetically labelled plot structure elements indicated between brackets—in the next three sub-sections of the constructed narrative.

Respondents' Experiences as Leaders

Similar to results from the studied literature, it appears that at TVET colleges the gendered experiences of women leaders are intricately connected to the balance between their professional careers and family roles (setting—B). Respondent 2 (line 171) admitted that she neglected her family, husband and children, but felt driven to succeed:

> And I must also say the successes also came at the expense of my family.

She (R2, lines 15–7) stayed abroad for a while to further her postgraduate studies:

> So, in a way, it's hard work and sacrifices. I mean, how can you leave [two toddlers] with a dad and a nanny for so many months?

R4's husband had to take on another job when they relocated from her home town in another province to the college where she was now appointed as deputy CEO, but he was always supportive (R4, lines 215–21):

> My husband really just had to do almost everything at home … He knew, I am in another place; they must just support.

Demographic influences moulded the respondents' personalities (characters—A) in dealing with gendered experiences on their career paths. R1's father was a Dutch Reformed minister and she grew up as a firstborn in the countryside. Although she provided examples of stereotypical gender roles, it was evident that she (R1, lines 6–14) acquired leadership skills intuitively:

> My father treated me like a boy from a young age, because he was already having this vision of having a son. I must go to … do the gardening, wash the cars outside. Cleaning the house with my mother, but my father was demanding that I must go change the tyre with him outside. While I was growing older I would always take a lead in the house to always make sure that I take decisions, because I was the boy in the house, but I was in the body of a girl [laughter].

Along their career paths (action—D), as indicated by the analytical framework, gendered experiences emerged at any of the three different phases, namely learning leadership, acquiring leadership, and performing leadership. The literature also indicates that the stage during which leadership is acquired is a stage characterised by high discrimination (Acker 2012, 413; Blackmore 2013, 147), where women are sabotaged through bias and unfair and stereotyped selection criteria that withhold top positions from them (Moorosi 2010, 549). Here the woman leader finds herself in an organisational culture where masculinity still dominates most of the systems and leadership approaches. According to Acker (2012, 413), the woman leader has to endure masculine hierarchies, marginalisation, discrimination and the preservation of gender segregation as a manager/leader in a male-dominated organisational culture. Several respondents (R1, R3, R5, R6, R7, R9) mentioned that the competition for top leadership positions became extremely fierce. R7—in her late fifties—narrated the following adverse gendered experience (R7, lines 292–97) during her interview for the post as CEO:

> The council interviewed me and one of the things I've said is that … it was also about the financial experience, which … the board asked me if I could handle the male staff. Just like that. I told them that I did it all the years … all the years of my life I deal with them, because you just need to know how to handle a man [laughter]. "No," I said, "I have no problem with a man, because to me, it's about the quality product we provide." And they appointed me.

R5—also in her fifties—had an interesting gendered experience when she applied for a post-level five post (that of campus manager). This promotion could not be fast-tracked as easily as her previous positions due to new appointment procedures around equity countrywide. These equity regulations favoured black men above white women. Nonetheless there were five other women leaders acting in the post-level five position who declared disputes, registered and won a class action to be appointed in deputy

principal positions. Fortunately, R5's (male) CEO stepped in to prevent a male from snatching the post-level five position from her (R5, lines 116–23):

> I then … it was about 2005, a post-level five came up. [Name of present CEO] decided to increase his post-level fives again to be … one in charge of engineering, one in charge of business, one in charge of hospitality, etcetera. So I applied for that post. And … I got the job, but I heard through the grapevine, that an African guy had applied. And old [the head of the panel] wanted him. Apparently [name of present CEO] … he actually shouted at [the head of the panel] and said, "The person I want is [name of R5]." And that's where I got to the post-level five.

Furthermore, the studied literature clarifies the notion of the so-called glass ceiling that often manifests on the second level of the career pathway. Acker (2012, 417) and McNae and Vali (2015, 299) use the notion of a glass ceiling to encapsulate the difficulties potential women leaders come across during the leadership acquisition phase. R6 had encountered many of the above-mentioned challenges. She explains (R6, lines 90–102):

> What did bother me during my interviews was that a stereotype … when a stereotype does your rating, then … if you do not want anyone in, you vote them low. It's just the way it works. So I cannot say it happened or it did not happen, but I think that at least one of the CEO posts … it seemed to me a decision had already been taken that the current principal would be appointed. It was in the grapevine where people asked you, "Why do you apply? Because we heard they were going to appoint this one for that post and that one for another post." And in hindsight, the six CEOs who were appointed at that time … they were three white men, two coloured men and a black woman. I think if you look at the deputies who were appointed that time, then you will also notice an interesting thing. Someone like [name of woman senior manager], formerly from [city in another province] who would be brilliant as a deputy, never received a deputy post in the Western Cape. So there were definitely horses for courses. Yes, right time, right place.

In order to crack the glass ceiling, R6 applied for 15 deputy principal posts (line 77) before she was appointed as college principal a few years ago. She elaborates (R6, lines 146–48) on the notion of the glass ceiling in the following statement:

> But I always felt I fought against the glass ceiling. And I always said, "If I could only crack [raised tone of voice] it, so that the next person can go through, it will be fine with me." But I will continue to bump against and I will offer a challenge to break through.

The constructed narratives also alluded to women leaders' experiences in terms of gender-related notions and challenges (problem—C), among others gender discrimination. Respondents not only shared examples of men-to-women discrimination, but also women-to-women discrimination (McNae and Vali 2015, 294). References to male chauvinism and bigotry emerged from the women leaders' narratives; for example, R5 referred to a "male chauvinist" (R5, lines 156, 310, 370)

several times; R8 mentioned that "you live invisible" (line 318) and R9 discussed a male who "treated women like dirt" (line 205). Then again, women-to-women discrimination compelled a respondent (R9) to quit because she could no longer work under "this rude, aggressive woman that needed to assert herself" (line 135). Envy among women prevented some from progressing in their careers, as R1 explained when she said "I'm tired of being hurt" (line 500)—this is a notion Van Zyl (2009, 32) terms the PHD (pull-him/her-down) syndrome. Women who reach higher ranks are often the victims of this syndrome (Van Zyl 2009, 32). R6 revealed, "When the principals meet with the Western Cape office and a senior woman official at DHET makes a proposal, the men CEOs grind her." The narratives confirmed that gender discrimination still thrives— sometimes disguised and sometimes less subtle. Due to gender discrimination, older respondents struggled longer to reach top positions, while the younger respondents' careers were fast-tracked by gender transformation legislation or in some cases by supportive senior colleagues.

How Gender Transformation Affected Respondents (If at All)

Respondents' stories were unravelled in an attempt to provide a contextualised interpretation of gender transformation as experienced (if at all) by the respondents themselves. Thus, special attention was given to the story of gender transformation in the narratives to interpret and tell the over-arching story. The results implied that progress has been made towards gender transformation during the past 10 to 15 years, a finding that concurs with the studies of Dlamini (2013, 171).

During their career progression, R3, R6 and R7 experienced a lack of gender transformation for a long period, but eventually obtained senior posts. The promotions of R3, R6, R8 and R10 occurred in their own colleges, although R3 only obtained a promotion after nine attempts (R3, lines 36–7). R7, R9, R2, R1 and R4 moved either laterally or into promotion at another college. R4 never faced gender discrimination when applying for senior posts, but as deputy CEO it was a different story (R4, lines 102–6):

> So I knew I had the experience that they don't have to work with all races. So I was not scared of them. I said my say and they didn't oppose me. But … in the boardroom … they allow you to say your say, but it doesn't mean it's gonna go your way. I learnt from the very beginning so … I had the satisfaction, as long as I stated my point. I knew I was gonna be out-voted.

R3, R5 and R7 experienced fierce gender discrimination early in their careers, and were unable to obtain permanent posts if they were engaged to be married. R3 (lines 66–7) even stated that "[she] had to hide [her] engagement ring in the cubby-hole."

Women's salaries were lower than those of their male counterparts and they had to resign when they fell pregnant. R4 and R9 mentioned that promotion was only available when "somebody dies" (R4, line 85) or after waiting for "fifty years" (R9, line 10). R1,

R5, R2 and R4 became despondent and speculated that they might consider leaving the sector shortly, which indicates that there is still room for improvement around gender transformation.

R7, R3 and R10 seemed to be the only three respondents who were comfortable in their positions and who did not describe many gender-related incidents, although I sensed that they were quite guarded in their responses—conduct that Nisbett and Wilson (1977, 252) call the "halo effect" where "likable" answers are given in their narratives.

All in all, R10's, R2's, R4's, R8's and R9's careers had been fast-tracked either due to gender-transformation policies or men who saw their potential and headhunted or groomed them for promotion. Also, this tendency (fast-tracking a career or headhunting) seemed to apply to the younger women—all women of colour, although this study did not focus on differentiating between age, race, culture or social class. It is impossible to make any generalisations with regard to a wider population due to the limited sample size of this study.

As explained in the next section, respondents related strategies and the application of various leadership approaches in different contexts as initiatives to deal with these gendered experiences (resolution—E).

Strategies and Initiatives Respondents Adopted to Deal with Gender-Related Issues

Finding strategies and initiatives to deal with gender-related issues including men-to-women and women-to-women discrimination at the leadership level in the TVET sector seemed to be problematic for many of the respondents and they battled to provide evidence that they had successfully coped with destructive gendered experiences.

Strategies

No respondent shared evidence that relief from work pressures was addressed through restructuring roles according to workload, a strategy advised by Tessens, Web, and White (2011). Conversely, developing women through mentoring (Doubell and Struwig 2013, 149) appeared to be a strategy that, although not applied deliberately, emerged in the stories of R9, R1, R7, R8, R10 and R2. R1's (lines 471–76) mentor taught her what she called "the tricks of the trade":

> I took it upon myself to learn … from her [the mentor] and, because of my willingness, that woman took me by her hand and said, "I'll teach you exactly how to write this thing." … So, I didn't mind to sit with her till eleven o'clock at night. Because I wanted to learn these things.

Another strategy that cropped up from the studied literature was the utilisation of support structures (Hoyt 2010, 488). Besides supportive husbands and/or family that all

respondents except R9 alluded to, none stated that they had experienced any other support structures such as family-friendly policies, flexi-time, childcare facilities on site, or safety measures eliminating potential sources of stress like hijacking after late meetings (Suraj-Narayan 2005, 88).

The assumption of Dlamini (2013, 155) that society could be sensitised towards gender transformation initiatives is not supported by the data. Government fast-tracked gender transformation in terms of numbers through equity legislation (RSA 2013, 15), but that did not address subtle men-to-women and women-to-women discrimination that emerged in the data. R10 encountered sexism at engineering campuses "amongst males across the board" (line 94), with no protective strategies in place. Subtle women-to-women discrimination made R1's work life strenuous until she made peace with the inevitable. She used the word "peace" 26 times during her interview. R8's strategy against subtle gender discrimination, such as peers and seniors withholding information from her, was to support and empower staff, although envy could be the reason why her seniors did not easily share their insights. R4 spoke almost disrespectfully about male counterparts and subtle gender discrimination and had tried strategies such as mentoring, and a "mother-hen" (line 158) leadership approach, but to no avail. Finally, she had experienced so many adverse emotions that she "shut up" (line 153) and applied the "silent strategy" (line 154). Her advice had fallen on deaf ears and she surrendered to protect herself.

The data support Tessens, Web, and White's (2011) notion that training programmes and furthering one's studies are strategies against gender discrimination. R7, R10, R2, R8, R4, R6 and R3 mentioned that they had all benefitted from furthering their studies or attending ad hoc training courses to equip and protect themselves against gender discrimination.

Another strategy alluded to by Tessens, Web, and White (2011) is that women leaders should be developed through peer and supervisor support and networking events. This last strategy seems to have benefitted R10 (lines 155–56) who explains "[she] got a lot of support and gained the respect of staff."

R5's support from her CEO was invaluable. He almost coerced her into senior positions. Ducklin and Ozga (2007, 639), Pande and Ford (2011, 8), Priola (2007, 37), Lumby and Azaola (2014, 42), and Grant (2012, 112) stress the importance of networking for aspirant women leaders in order to connect with influential business leaders and advance their own careers. None of the respondents alluded to attending high profile or industry networking opportunities. The two respondents who mentioned networking at inter-college level rejected the notion due to bad experiences. Initially R9 regarded this inter-college networking group as a "sound board" (line 398) with peers whom she could trust, but soon gossiping undermined the goal and the network "collapsed" (line 398). She referred to two women whom she regarded as remarkable role models in the sector

who often provided peer and supervisor support, but who had never been promoted to principal positions.

Limited strategies emerged from the data. The respondents' feelings of defeat revealed that many men and women still get away with subtle gender discriminatory behaviour and that gender transformation cannot simply be quantified in terms of equity only. As leadership approaches and management styles were also analysed as possible initiatives to reduce adverse gendered experiences, some initiatives are discussed next.

Initiatives

Pierce and Newstrom (2006, 92) conceptualise the leadership process as a link between context, leader, and follower—factors that influence outcomes. White and Özkanlı (2010, 9) add that diverse leadership approaches which depend on the context and follower may reduce adverse gendered experiences and may thus present an initiative against gender-related issues. Mauthner and Edwards (2010, 494) argue that women use an authoritarian management style to resist power imbalances. The data revealed that at least one respondent (R9) battled to affirm herself in a male-dominated space. She first tried to build relationships and then reverted to aggression, portraying a contingent and autocratic leadership approach. Also, she compared herself with another woman leader, whom she depicted as "the motherly type" (line 107), which coincides with Lumby and Azaola's (2014, 30, 32) finding that over 50 per cent of a group of women leaders self-reported adopting a mothering leadership style.

R3 followed a transactional leadership approach (displaying contingent reward behaviour) when she asked two men to clean the campus. When they became despondent, she offered them some refreshments and "*da' gaat hulle weer lank aan*" ("and that got them going again for a long time") (line 192). Depending on the context, respondents demonstrated leadership approaches such as, among others, a directive or autocratic leadership approach and a situational leadership approach. R9 depicted her previous male CEO as a remarkable transformational leader—someone who transforms institutions by inspiring staff to rise above the ordinary, benefitting the group through charisma, enthusiasm, cognitive inspiration, and personal attention (Du Plessis 2009, 136–38). She decided to emulate this leadership style as a resolution to bring about gender transformation. Next, the outcomes of the re-storied story or constructed narrative are conveyed via the narrative response.

The Narrative Response

The main research question of the reported study, namely what the narratives of women currently in leadership positions in TVET colleges in the Western Cape tell us about gender transformation (or the lack thereof) in this sector, was partially answered through the three subsidiary questions above. The first two subsidiary questions alluded to the women leaders' gender transformation experiences and how gender transformation affected them.

First, the career pathways revealed that the older women leaders experienced progressive gender transformation in terms of promotion, although only late in their careers. In contrast, those respondents who were 10 to 20 years younger than the older leaders progressed quickly. Then there were women, across the board, who struggled to achieve promotion due to subtle women-to-women discrimination and various other reasons, despite gender transformation legislation. Also, the data revealed that challenges restricting career progression caused some of the respondents to abandon their ambition by the performance phase of the career pathway, as is revealed by R5 when she observes "I can't do it anymore" (line 159).

Second, despite gender transformation legislation, the data revealed that most women leaders worked harder than men to "prove" themselves and/or to compete for senior positions, so much so that many respondents complained about health problems. Gender transformation indicators in terms of discrimination, stereotyping, and barriers respondents faced reflected a bleaker scenario than career progression. Gender transformation legislation has failed to equip respondents with strategies to deal with gender discrimination. While interpreting the third subsidiary question, it became clear that the respondents struggled to produce evidence of these strategies. References to "hard work" cropped up more than once as a strategy in itself, but despite concepts such as mentoring and networking opportunities, proposed as strategies to effect gender transformation, the respondents provided insufficient evidence to confirm that they had sufficient resolutions for experiences of gender discrimination.

The answers to the three subsidiary questions help us to understand that some progress has been made regarding gender transformation in terms of the career progression of women leaders in the Western Cape vocational context during the past 10 to 15 years. The changing social context that is underway as a result of equity legislation has, in fact, enabled women to move beyond the patriarchal constraints that have subjected women to subordinate status in terms of taking up positions of leadership. Conversely, the insufficient progress in gender transformation in terms of gender stereotyping, (men-to-women and women-to-women) gender discrimination and other gender-related challenges is disturbing and causes some women to abandon their ambition by the performing leadership phase. This scenario, where competent, potential women leaders surrender and/or even leave the sector, aggravates the dearth of women in the pool of aspiring college principals, although the sample size in this article precludes any claim that my conclusions refer to all women in leadership roles in TVET. Furthermore, "narrative smoothing" (Connelly and Clandinin 1990, 10) could have occurred during the interviewing and/or re-storying processes, thus readers also need to interrogate the untold stories or "narrative secrets" (Connelly and Clandinin 1990, 10). Moreover, this article does not have a "Hollywood plot" (1990, 10)—a specific danger when using a narrative approach—where all is well in the end. Finally, in the conclusion, this article reports on the results, contributions, recommendations, limitations, delimitations and significance of the study.

Conclusion

In the study reported in this article we explored gender transformation experiences of women leaders in TVET colleges in the Western Cape through a narrative approach, focusing on purposively selected respondents' stories. Women in educational leadership positions are still underrepresented globally and gender transformation endeavours do not seem to permeate the education sector adequately. Ten women leaders' gendered experiences were interpreted via a conceptual framework, and then—through several coding methods—re-storied within the bounds of a specific plot structure (i.e. characters, setting, problem, actions, and resolutions), and illustrated in an aligned analytical framework. The results reveal that progress has been made regarding gender equity, but gender stereotyping and discrimination still prevail. Furthermore, the results confirm the suitability of the theoretical framework in terms of exploring women leaders' gender transformation experiences and how women learn about leadership.

This article and more specifically the theoretical and analytical framework add to the limited literature on women leaders' life stories and assist in providing recommendations given the gender transformation experiences. For policy developers and decision makers seeking to reduce gender discrimination and stereotyping among potential TVET college leaders, strategies and initiatives from this article might promote interest in formulating interventions to inform, sensitise, empower and/or transform men and women leaders at key stages of their career pathways. Evidence in the data corpus indicates that there might be a need in the sector to capacitate potential and current leaders through an all-inclusive gender transformation strategy. This strategy could form part of diversity management as listed under topic three (Management Skills) of Robertson's (2015, 213) leadership curriculum framework model and be used as a guideline to capacitate leaders.

The study sought to provide an insider perspective on the shared gendered experiences of educational women leaders through a narrative methodology and serves as a point of departure in addressing all-inclusive gender transformation to the advantage of potential and existing women and men in TVET college leadership positions. The respondents' lived and told stories yielded a data corpus with a number of "buried treasures" (Saldana 2013, 259), adding further depth to the conclusions. Given the limited sample available, no differentiation was made between the experiences of campus, senior, or portfolio managers, academic heads, and vice-principals or principals. Furthermore, except for gender aspects, the narratives were neither interpreted in terms of diversity (encompassing race, gender, culture, tenure, education, age, ethnic group, personality, organisational function, cognitive style, and background), nor intersectionality (intersecting social identities). The study was restricted to women leaders in the Western Cape TVET colleges. This could yield different perspectives to those in the rest of South Africa due to various reasons, including socio-economic, racial, cultural, and political differences. Also, a study identifying the mechanisms that create gender discrimination and that offers alternatives to inform, sensitise, and transform society is lacking. Lastly,

the role of male leaders and partners who have empowered women on their college career pathways remains unexplored.

Finally, regarding the broader significance of this study, there is still a great deal to be done based on gender transformation interventions to inform, sensitise, empower and transform men and women leaders at key stages of their career pathways. Behind the reported narratives are the untold stories (Connelly and Clandinin 1990, 10) and much scope for further research. This study therefore only serves as a point of departure in addressing all-inclusive gender transformation to the advantage of women and men in TVET college leadership.

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