Female School Leaders Navigating Leadership During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Quintile 2 Ranking Schools in Gauteng, South Africa

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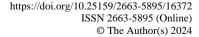zvisinei.moyo@gmail.com

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Abstract

The proliferation of COVID-19 disrupted educational systems, leaving school leaders struggling to find solid leadership practices as the pandemic responses and protocols were everchanging. This paper sought to explore how female school leaders in disadvantaged schools navigated gendered and professional roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using an interpretive lens and a qualitative research approach, the study collected data through semi-structured interviews and document reviews from six purposively selected female school leaders. Data was thematically analysed. Findings showed that patriarchal culture and gender stereotyping continue to exist. Social conventions such as empathy and sympathy have proven to be effective means of uniting subordinates; assertiveness strengthened leaders' leadership styles. Socioeconomic inequalities and resistance affected female leadership. Female leaders encouraged teamwork and collaboration and drew on colleagues' expertise and abilities despite the demands of leading schools with minimal resources. This study offers insights into unique challenges, strategies, gender dynamics, and policy recommendations for support, contributing to discussions on equity, social justice, and intersectionality of gender and educational leadership. Future research should compare female leaders in disadvantaged public schools in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic with those in affluent schools, focusing on their experiences.

Keywords: Female school leaders; quintile 2 schools; gendered roles; COVID-19; culture of patriarchy; disadvantaged schools; Social Justice

Introduction

The global virus contagion known as COVID-19 made its way to the ground level in South Africa in March 2020, when the country implemented stay-at-home measures in response to the outbreak. The subsequent disruptions caused widespread effects across South Africa's social and economic systems. While the COVID-19 pandemic's consequences on areas including health, the economy, social order, and education have been thoroughly studied, research on the underlying effects on school leadership is scant. Nkosi and Moyo (2023) observe that the crisis caused by COVID-19 has had far-reaching effects in the field of education, as schools in many countries around the world were immediately closed. School closures because of the impact of COVID-19 affected over one billion students worldwide (Harris and Jones 2020). School leaders tasked with leading this transition were thrust into the role of leading in a highly uncertain and ever-changing reality. There is a lack of understanding about the effects that COVID-19 had on female school leaders, particularly the challenges faced by those who oversaw under-resourced schools in South Africa. Thus, the current study aimed to explore how female school leaders in disadvantaged schools navigated gendered and professional roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. Quintile ranking or poverty score of a school is based on the poverty level of the community in which it is situated (Mestry and Schmidt 2012). In this study, quintile ranking refers to public schools that are divided into different categories according to the wealth of the community where the school is located. The five quintiles of schools range from the most impoverished to the more affluent schools. Quintiles one to three are allotted to institutions serving underprivileged populations, and parents are not required to pay school fees. Quintiles four and five schools serve more affluent communities, and the School Governing Bodies (SGBs) have the power to determine the cost of tuition.

Researchers from a variety of fields have pointed out the covert effects that the COVID-19 outbreak has had on educational institutions (Harris and Jones 2020; Huber and Helm 2020; McLeod and Dusky 2021; Ravele and Moyo 2023). They contend that education-related responses to the pandemic have placed additional burdens on school leaders, with special regard for female school leaders who face several contextual factors both professionally and personally. Female school leaders were already operating in the context of gender biases (Martinez, Molina-López and de Cabo 2021; Moyo, Perumal and Hallinger 2020), and as schools adjusted to a new normal, they found themselves navigating additional layers of complexity (Crosslin and Bailey 2021). According to Njoku and Evans (2022), women in education who have spent several years coping with the negative forces of socioeconomic and racial disparities, emotional tolls and invisible burdens within school systems suddenly find themselves needing to adjust to an additional layer related to work responsibilities, the overall wellbeing of their personal lives, dealing with colleagues and diverse learners, managerial leadership and home responsibilities.

A long history of research on working women indicates that they face a variety of conflicts and pressures (Collins et al. 2019; Moyo and Perumal 2019) that force them to negotiate responses to offset the generalised stereotypes prevalent in their communities. Studies on women in leadership typically focus on qualities such as flexibility, supportiveness, nurturing, collaboration, collegiality and social justice (Moorosi, Fuller and Reilly 2018; Moyo and Perumal 2019; Khumalo 2021). It is difficult to understand how possessing these qualities can improve one's ability to lead in times of uncertainty, such as those brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic conditions have profoundly amplified and changed the ways in which these narratives are navigated for female school leaders. Furthermore, the realities of COVID-19 have shifted female leaders' sense of leadership authority, embodied realities, workspaces, roles, daily tasks, and time boundaries in ways that require adjustments to be made at work and in their personal spaces.

In South Africa, as in the rest of the world, the pandemic's educational impact included learning losses because of school closures, the widening of pre-existing education disparities and the eradication of learning gains that had been made over time (Harris and Jones 2020). A differentiated set of educational opportunities was presented to the learners and their teachers because of the disparities in the levels of social capital and access to resources that are available around them. Because remote learning was encouraged by the authorities, both learners and their teachers found that they needed to devote more time and resources to this method of education. According to the findings of Di Pietro et al. (2020), moving the school into people's homes was a seismic shift that would have long-lasting consequences for both educators and learners. Although it may be true that women are progressively moving into roles of leadership in education, there still exists vast unexplored territory in understanding and discussing perceptions and experiences of female school leaders, especially in the years following the end of Apartheid in South Africa (Naidoo and Perumal 2014).

Leading effectively may be constrained because of the many challenges and difficulties which female leaders face (Moyo and Perumal 2020; Khumalo 2021). Crosslin and Bailey (2021) state that the COVID-19 pandemic conditions have augmented the constraints experienced by female leaders. In addition, overlapping gendered and professional identities create obstacles specific to female leaders. Considering this, this study sought to examine the perspectives of female school leaders on how COVID-19 affected disadvantaged primary schools and to proffer recommendations that can help minimise the challenges they face. It intended to answer the research question: How do female school leaders in quintile two schools navigate gendered and professional roles during the COVID-19 pandemic? The study provides valuable insights into the unique challenges and strategies employed by female school leaders in managing crises and fostering resilience within marginalised communities. It could shed light on gender dynamics in educational leadership, highlight effective leadership practices, and offer recommendations for policy and practice to support women leaders and vulnerable schools during times of crisis. Additionally, such research could contribute to broader

discussions on equity, social justice, and the intersectionality of gender and educational leadership.

Theoretical Framework

Social justice was used to frame this study. Reagan and Hambacher (2021) define social justice as the equitable division of power, wealth and responsibilities among members of society, irrespective of their colour, nationality, age, sexuality, capability or sexual preference, religion or spiritual origin. The National Association of School Psychologists backs up this argument by stating that social justice promotes non-discriminatory practices and empowers families and communities (Graplin and Shriberg 2020). According to Khumalo (2021), school administrators are responsible for ensuring that justice is served to all school members because it is the first attribute of social structures. Social justice and education are linked since schools exist inside a society and are caricatures of the societies in which they operate. It promotes individual rights, especially in the context of a school setting. Since female leadership happens in a social environment with social barriers such as enmity and hostility, Moyo and Perumal (2019) argue that a strategy is needed to achieve a better perspective as to how society views female leadership. This theory elucidates that women school leaders who are oppressed by their subordinates, particularly male subordinates, are victims of biased and debauched behaviour. It can also be argued that cultural dispositions and contextual conventions that discriminate against female leaders based on their femineity promote social injustice and shatter the principle of equality for all. According to Ramos (2020), the pandemic situation amplified work adversity and gender-based violence at home. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the inequalities in the communities and educational system of South Africa.

Challenges Experienced by Female School Leaders Leading Quintile 2 Schools

"How we approach a situation is shaped by our work structure, but our range of responses is affected by our culture" (Mestry and Schmidt 2012, 537).

Leading effectively may be constrained because of the many challenges and difficulties which female leaders face (Moyo and Perumal, 2020; Khumalo, 2021), particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Lumby and Moorosi (2022), prospects for women in educational leadership in various contexts continue to be constrained by notions of leadership as a predominantly male and masculine realm. Despite significant advancements for South African women, gender inequality and discrimination are still rife. The study highlights the challenges faced by women in leadership.

Sociocultural Challenges

Traditional social practices have created a legacy of bias and generalisations that discriminate against women (Netshitangani 2018). Patriarchy is one such social practice. Patriarchal culture views the role of the woman as a nurturer of the family (Moyo 2022) and that men have the qualities to lead schools while women are expected to follow (Martinez et al. 2021). These sentiments are echoed by Drake and Owen (1998), who posit that female leaders in Indonesia experienced environmental barriers and stereotypes related to gender roles that pigeonhole them into vocations that required caregiving and support. Lumby and Moorosi (2022) shed light on how the remnants of the patriarchal society are curbing women's access to leadership positions.

Cultural norms that perceive female leaders as violating traditional feminine roles can lead to unhappy marriages and divorce, presenting a challenge for female leaders (Ravele and Moyo 2023). Netshitangani (2018) explains that a woman who cooked and did her husband's laundry was considered a 'good' woman in traditional African culture. A study of Israeli educational leadership conducted by Davids (2018) highlighted the restrictive situation of Arab women who endure a patriarchal hierarchy. Mavin and Grandy (2016) observed in an Iranian study that doing gender 'well' meant that women were required to have good Iranian femininity by getting married and having children. Netshitangani (2018) posits that different societies implement patriarchy in various ways. These societal attitudes create many unpleasant experiences for women who lead, more so during times of uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where several adaptations were needed. It can be problematic for female school administrators to implement changes in their schools as they are undermined and seen as the weaker sex by patriarchal communities.

Gender Bias in Educational Institutions

Strong societal and religious conventions governing how males and females interact with each other and what role each plays in society have created challenges in the work environment for females seeking management positions (Gilani et al. 2022). A significant organisational factor preventing women from accessing educational management has been found to be the presence of men acting as "gatekeepers" (Ndebele 2018). In addition, social and cultural backgrounds have a strong influence on female leader effectiveness in school settings. Women leaders also face unconscious gender bias, which occurs when a person consciously rejects gender stereotypes but still unconsciously makes assumptions based on stereotypes. Khumalo (2021) refer to it as the significant but frequently undetectable obstacles to women's success brought on by cultural gender norms and workplace policies, procedures and interactional patterns that unintentionally favour men. Moyo, Perumal and Hallinger (2020) have argued that these subtle stereotypes become dangerous and will sometimes manifest when perpetrators act inappropriately or say negative things about female leaders based on the stereotypes they harbour in their minds.

Gender-based stereotypes also affect female leaders' zeal to assume leadership positions in the schools in which they work. Females are underrepresented in administrative roles in educational systems, which makes it challenging to eradicate and address the institutional culture of a "strong man", according to Moorosi (2010). Females are frequently expected to stay at home rather than assume positions that were formerly held by men, such as managing a school. Organisational processes clearly demonstrate a preference for men when recruiting employees (Ndebele 2018). Gender differences between men and women make conditions difficult for women to obtain the opportunity to be placed in senior leadership positions. There seems to be a patriarchal male culture of domination, and several schools tend to be permeated with masculine norms (Davis and Maldonado 2015). According to Ndebele (2018), while men are groomed to be assertive, powerful, and self-promotional, societal beliefs towards women in leadership positions continue to suggest to women that these qualities are typically undesirable. Female school leaders are viewed as inept and incompetent, not only by male co-workers but also by female co-workers (Ndebele 2018). Nkosi and Moyo (2023) support this idea by positing that female school leaders do not have the support of female colleagues since the patriarchal establishment has been questioned. Crosslin and Bailey (2021) argue that women are resilient leaders and possess higher levels of skills than men do.

Strategies Adopted by Women School Leaders to Balance Their Personal and Professional Lives

The potential to successfully juggle the demands of their professional and home lives presents an extra obstacle for women who hold leadership positions in schools. When it comes to the demands of work and family, there is always an imbalance, which results in feelings of conflict (Brough et al. 2020). The stress that can result from trying to find a healthy balance between responsibilities to one's family, job and personal life can lead to mental and physical problems. Moyo (2022) says that conflicts between work and home can lead to missing work or being late, not having enough energy, thinking about family issues at work and work issues at home, and not wanting to take on extra work that might cut into time with the family, among others.

The situation is much more precarious for female school leaders who oversee the administration at quintile two schools. These schools are characterised as having ageing infrastructure, inadequate facilities, overcrowded classrooms, and relatively poor educational achievements, all of which culminate in perpetuating inequity that has failed many learners who attend them. To be successful in this environment, you need to be able to demonstrate strong leadership skills in the classroom. According to the findings of Leithwood (2019), effective school leadership is the primary factor that influences student learning more than classroom instruction. In addition, effective school leadership acts as a catalyst for maximising the potential that already exists in the school. This involves promoting teaching and learning in the workplace and learner performance and boosting teacher performance by increasing their motivation,

dedication and capacity. In addition, Lumby and Moorosi (2022) believe that leaders are responsible for giving the school a distinct vision and a sense of direction. Most effective leaders are characterised by having powerful moral and ethical goals and a robust sense of social justice.

To meet the challenges of leadership in circumstances that are influenced by both their personal lives and the duties of their jobs, female school leaders are adopting characteristics of teamwork, showing care and patience. The behaviour of female principals has been described as constructive, complicit, or collusive (Mestry and Schmidt 2012). This is because female principals appear to be submissive to the cultural gender laws associated with the system. However, at the same time, they are subverting these laws by continuing their own daily work. This shows that even though leadership positions come with responsibilities, women can continue fulfilling them even when they are difficult or even dangerous.

Strategies Employed by Female School Leaders During the COVID-19

The following were some of the strategies used by the female principals to resolve issues that surfaced during COVID-19. Through self-directed learning, the female principals were able to acquire knowledge and skills that helped them disseminate information about the pandemic and allay followers' fears. By using capacity-building interventions, the female principals were able to reduce their own and the student's anxiety and fear, which eased the parents' concerns about sending their children to school. Additionally, the staff members' understanding of the virus and how to prevent infection while safeguarding students, themselves, and their families was also aided. To make up for the missing instructional time, they put in more hours of labour, which improved academic performance in their schools. As stated by Lumby and Moorosi (2022), women principals must be lifelong learners through information-gathering activities like reading and participating in online and seminar courses in order to keep current. Thus, the multifaceted idea of self-directed learning becomes crucial in the context of professional learning.

Dealing with issues that arose at the school during COVID-19 seemed to be less difficult when other members of the school community, such as parents, the SGB, the SMT, teachers, and support staff, were included in the decision-making process. Education leaders are empathetic observers who value teamwork and involvement, acting as experts in forming connections and persuading others to pursue their objectives fully (Lumby and Moorosi 2022). According to Ravele and Moyo (2023), an effective rural principal recognises teachers as cooperative co-leaders to improve school accomplishment as a means of adapting to the challenges of the role. Without a doubt, the more significant concern that female principals have when working with all the school's partners is what enables shared decision-making and problem awareness, which in turn allows for a move away from surface-level administration and towards finding the best solution to most problems for the greater good. According to Moyo, Perumal

and Hallinger (2020), female principals exhibit a strong sense of duty by employing cooperative methods, demonstrating an aptitude for teamwork, and embodying the traits of law-based authority by promoting involvement and participation in decision-making.

Research Methodology.

This qualitative study was located within an interpretive paradigm in that interpretative studies seek to understand social phenomena better (Nieuwenhuis 2007). The goal of doing qualitative research was to gain an increased understanding of the reality that people create for themselves in a specific social context. The qualitative approach gives the researcher an opportunity to investigate how others interpret their lives and to share and comprehend the perspectives and understanding of others (Creswell 2014). In addition, attributes of an interpretative paradigm which were used to better understand the social phenomena within participants' lived worlds included exploring the depth of the phenomena, the richness of the participants translating their experiences, and the complexities that female leaders faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, criticisms of the interpretive research paradigm are its subjectivity and the failure of the approach to generalising its findings beyond the circumstances under investigation (Nieuwenhuis 2007).

The interpretative phenomenology design was selected to conduct this study as this assisted in gaining a clear understanding and acquiring knowledge of the lived challenges while also providing rich descriptions of the encounters of female administrators in disadvantaged primary schools. It emphasises understanding the significance of phenomena in their larger context. It goes beyond description. In phenomenological research, the phenomenon is identified, data is typically gathered through in-depth interviews, bracketing is used to minimise biases, data is analysed to identify significant themes, and findings are presented in a narrative format that encapsulates the richness of participant experiences (Alase 2017).

Convenience sampling guided the selection of six female participants comprising four principals and two deputy principals from quintile two public primary schools located in the Tshwane South District in the Gauteng Province. Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling technique often used in qualitative research where participants are selected based on their accessibility and proximity to the researcher (Scholtz 2021). This district was selected due to my easy access to the schools. Most of the learners attending these schools are from nearby informal settlements. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the six participants. The interviews took place at the participants' offices and lasted 45 to 60 minutes each. According to Creswell (2014), the semi-structured format allows the researcher to pose open-ended questions with very little control over the participants' responses. A pre-determined set of questions guided the interviews.

Document review was helpful in gathering information on female leadership during COVID-19, gathering information on the impact of COVID-19 in quintile two schools,

and triangulating data generated from semi-structured interviews. These were learner assessment records, school timetables identifying the implementation of the phased-in approach to teaching, teacher and learner attendance registers, minutes of school-based support team meetings, minutes of school management team meetings and teacher personal files. The aim was to gather data on pass rates, timetabling models, learners' and teachers' attendance patterns, COVID-19-related activities, teachers' qualifications, and the subjects they teach. Thematic analysis was used to examine keywords to identify and define themes (Saldana 2021). Semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. To understand the data, transcripts and audio recordings were read several times. Codes were assigned to the data to study sorted units of meaning. The process continued until all data was segmented and initial coding was completed.

Parallel data sets were given new codes based on the developed meaning units (Nieuwenhuis 2007). Themes were connected to previously evaluated literature. The reviewed literature was frequently consulted to investigate the analogous linkages, competing viewpoints, judgments and controversies that emerged from the empirical facts and theoretical framework in which the research is grounded. The four elements of trustworthiness, that is, credibility, transferability, dependability and reliability, were used as criteria to ensure rigour and establish the legitimacy of the findings (Guba and Lincoln 1994). Credibility was established through triangulation of data collection methods and document review, with the supervisor serving as a reviewer and critical thinker. An audit trail of evidence, including notes, ideas, and raw data, was provided to ensure the research's reliability. To achieve the dependability requirement, audio recordings, interview schedules, documents viewed with permission from the principals, and notes on the reviewed documentation were all kept on file in case unforeseen challenges arose. Detailed accounts of the individuals and the surrounding circumstances were provided to achieve transferability. Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that as results might aid in the understanding of patterns, the results of this study may be extrapolated to other communities that possess comparable characteristics. The study employed a continuous process of reflection and data triangulation to eliminate potential bias, incorporating participants' personal words and references to reviewed documents. The supervisor ensured data-based interpretations and conclusions, avoiding personal prejudice and presenting clear representations of participants' worldviews and experiences (Creswell 2014). Approval of the study was sought from the University's Research Ethics Committee. Thereafter, all other ethical considerations were adhered to, such as obtaining access and consent from the participants.

Findings and Interpretation

The purpose of the study was to explore how female school leaders in disadvantaged schools navigated gendered and professional roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. All the participants' responses to the questions that framed this study were interrogated. This section discusses the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the analysis of the data. To protect the participants and for the sake of confidentiality, the following key

was used instead of names to present the exact responses of the participants: P1, P2, P3, P4, P5 and P6.

Cultural and Contextual Norms Shaping Female School Leadership

Culture of Patriarchy

In response to the question about the work-related challenges they faced as females in leadership positions, the participants revealed that patriarchy is still very rife in organisations. Three out of the six participants indicated that they are still battling with male dominance in the workplace. P1 indicated: "You are disrespected by male teachers without knowing your leadership skills." This feeling was echoed by P2, who stated: "We have males who believe that they stand a better chance of managerial positions, and as females, we are undermined by male colleagues. P6 confirmed that a culture of patriarchy still exists: The males see themselves as more suitable than females in management positions."

P3 reiterated the sentiment by indicating (frowning): "As a female leader, the challenge is that men are not prepared to take instructions from a female leader and do not take their responsibilities seriously."

Women leaders in organisations had to fight COVID-19 while still fighting patriarchy. According to Moyo (2022), patriarchy refers to male domination and power within a social system. The actions that are promoted to maintain men's dominant social position and women's subjugation are referred to as hegemonic masculinity, as defined by Lumby and Moorosi (2022). The glass ceiling effect—the imperceptible restrictions that women face in the workplace—has a substantial impact on how leaders interpret their experiences, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nkosi and Moyo 2023). Due to the disparity between the demands of the role and societal identity (women), Netshitangani (2018) describe how merit may not stick to the bodies of women in leadership positions (leader). This point of view is socially unjust and goes against the principles of the social justice philosophy (Khumalo 2021).

Teachers' Attitudes

Many factors contribute to teachers' general negative attitudes regarding women in leadership roles. One of the conclusions linked to this bias against women in leadership roles is pressure from female teachers. Martnez et al. (2021) contend that women prefer to have a male in a position of power than a woman. Women who lead schools are viewed as inept, not only by males but also by female teachers.

When asked about the work-related challenges a female in a leadership position faces, P2 stated that the challenges faced were aggravated by female teachers: "The female colleagues, you get challenges from them, especially when you are in a higher position.

Like there is this sort of competition you know. And how can I say it? You are being sidelined."

This claim was not made in isolation since P3, P5, and P6 expressed the following opinions:

P3: "Women you lead normally has a tendency of testing your capabilities and intellect."

P5: "We are many females and there is female rivalry. Also, we have a male principal, and he is in a relationship with one of the female teachers. It is very difficult since then the controls are seated with the teacher."

P6: "The ladies tend to undermine me. They display feelings of jealousy and continuously backstab me. This makes my job as a leader very difficult."

However, male teachers generally interact better with female leaders. When questioned about the perceptions of male teachers and female leaders, P4 said: "Oh, the male staff, I must say I get along very well with the male staff. I find them very level-headed and really very supportive. P6 concurred by saying: "There are good relationships between male and male and male and female, but not so good between female and female, demonstrating that they have good working relationships with their male colleagues."

The gender-related points made above articulate that female leadership takes place in a social setting rife with barriers, including negativity and rejection. This implies the necessity of social justice promotion initiatives. The study's findings indicate that female co-workers, in addition to their male counterparts, believed female leaders to be incapable and incompetent. Teachers' perceptions of female leaders may be significantly influenced by culture and tradition. Since the school is an extension of the community, cultural beliefs will also be expressed in the school context.

Gender Stereotypes

In patriarchal communities, gender stereotypes are created by defining conventional roles for men and women (Netshitangani 2018). The participants highlighted the understanding of conventional social roles for men and women that increase gender stereotyping. The data revealed that gender prejudices and stereotypes continue to exacerbate the difficulties that female school leaders face even during COVID-19 times.

P1 said**: "**During lockdown, we decided to distribute food parcels to the parents. The male colleagues refused to come to the school to assist in making the food parcels as they felt it was a woman's job."

P2 and P5 echoed the same sentiment:

P2: "I must clean the house, I must cook. I must also do the laundry. I must do everything that needs to be done at home and I must do it myself as it is my duty."

P5: "I have a male teacher who is very difficult to manage. He is my senior in age and refuses to meet deadlines. I find it hard to enforce the rules on him because firstly, he is older than me and secondly, being a male, there is a sense of respect."

Negative bias, sexist generalisations and stereotypical myths are barriers that prevent female school leaders from effectively carrying out their duties and responsibilities. It is commonly believed that males are better suited for school leadership roles (Moyo and Perumal, 2019; Moyo, Perumal and Hallinger, 2020). The continuous reporting of women's experiences through a nexus of male and female power play, as Naidoo and Perumal (2014) have argued, disfigures the conversation by limiting it to a campaign to achieve gender parity. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in gendered impacts and has affected the productivity of teachers. Martinez et al. (2021) state that females are generally considered unsuitable for roles that require masculine characteristics.

Challenges Experienced by Female School Leaders During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Resistance

The data showed that female leaders received resistance not only from staff members but also from parents. Some employees refused to carry out their duties, undermining the leadership of women leaders. Parents showed resistance by not having sufficient faith in female leaders to lead the schools during the pandemic. P2 stated: "They were more resistant because they were also scared. They said they did not want to die of COVID-19. They refused to return, even after the district stepped in and asked them to."

P4, P5 and P6 reaffirmed this view:

P4: "Mostly for fear of their own health, but a lot of resistance matter even from amongst the school management team because they are all older staff. I can remember, well, one already indicated to me that she has a comorbidity."

P5: "Teachers were not responding to my messages and there was no evidence of teachers working."

P6: "Teachers were fearful of getting COVID-19 and did not come to school."

Teachers were hesitant to participate in online meetings. P6 clarified: "Because of COVID protocols, many face-to-face meetings were cancelled. We had to communicate via WhatsApp. This provided a challenge. Some teachers would say they do not have data. Others would just not join in the meetings, and we had no idea where they were."

Some teachers showed up to work without face masks. P1 declared: "Some of my teachers would deliberately not wear masks. I had the difficult task of not allowing them to enter the school and send them home to get masks only to find that they do not return to work."

According to Harris and Jones (2020), school leadership during the pandemic was complicated by the demanding and chaotic circumstances created by the pandemic itself. Ravele and Moyo (2023) argue that what heightened the leadership crisis in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic was that there was a lack of blueprints, precedents and ring binders to help school leaders through the maelstrom of COVID-19. The root cause of parents' resistance to sending their children to school was due to lack of trust.

P1 elaborated: "First day, it was chaos. Parents were all here to see if ever it is real. That their children were going to be protected against the virus. Some parents refuse to send their children to school". P4 echoed the sentiment: "Parents are not always supporting the school. Parents were not happy to send their kids back to school. I had to write a letter to them, explaining to them these are the rules and regulations that will now be followed at the school. I had to take pictures of the class being distanced, I had to take pictures of the classrooms being sanitised."

There is controversy as to whether women are indeed equipped for leadership roles. According to Naidoo and Perumal (2014), because of their gender, women's internal and external struggles are frequently seen as a lack of ability to hold leadership positions. In South African society, it is believed that only men are capable of leading and that women should obey men. Women are at a disadvantage because they must put in more effort to persuade the prevailing cultural system that they are capable leaders (Nkosi and Moyo 2023). Women in leadership positions in underprivileged schools face prejudice from other staff members, with many of them doubting their ability to lead. Therefore, it is challenging for women leaders to get the support of their staff.

Creating Balance Between Work-Home Life

To determine how female leaders balanced their work and home life during COVID-19, the following questions were posed: (1) How do you strike a balance between work and family responsibilities? (2) How did you manage during the COVID-19 pandemic?

In response to the above questions, participants related:

P1: "It is difficult for me to strike a balance. I have the dual roles of being a mother and a wife and a support system at home. Leadership role. My children are still young. I knock off late to try to complete the work."

P2: "I am trying to manage, but I am not winning. I must work at home because to finish my work. I do not have time with my family because I also work on weekends. I am blessed to have the support of my husband who often helps with the cooking."

P3: "I do because having a very supportive family and a good school management team, enable one to deal with every situation."

P4: "I spend very little time with my family, really. We eat a lot of eat out. I try to make time to speak to my children and my husband in the evenings."

P5: "There is no balance. For me personally, I drew up a timetable for seven days of the week to help me in managing my time. I decided to go to the gym or to take care of, myself, physically. So, in double or deal working in my household or multitasking in my household."

P6: "There is no balance to strike. Most of my spare time is used for schoolwork. My children at home are big, so they can help with the chores, but there is no family time."

In response to the second question, participants related:

P2: "I can say it didn't make it worse because then I was at home. And then I think it was better working at home doing my schoolwork at home also because then I didn't have to drive all the way because I stay far from where I work."

P5: "I had more time for my family. I enjoyed spending more time with my grandchild. I could do my schoolwork and household chores without being pressed for time. Also, I could get up a bit later every morning."

The responses from participants in relation to question 1 indicated that female leaders struggled to strike a balance between work and family responsibilities. This confirms the statement by Crosslin and Bailey (2022) that the overlapping of gendered and professional identities creates obstacles specific to female leaders. The responses to question 2 showed that participants enjoyed the flexibility of working from home, which enabled them to achieve some degree of balance in their work-home lives. Participants, although from rural areas, enjoyed the support and assistance from their husbands and children. This refutes the statement made by Tshweneyagae (2019) that husbands in rural areas do not support their wives with home chores. However, although the participants interviewed had positive experiences during the lockdown, there were many reports of gender-based violence, rapes and killings of women and children in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns.

Socioeconomic Inequalities

With regards to the questions on socioeconomic factors that affected their leadership decisions and navigating the transition from leading at school to leading remotely during

the pandemic, the data revealed that female leaders have had trouble leading schools in disadvantaged societies due to socioeconomic inequalities, which were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Female heads experience emotional stress in socioeconomically disadvantaged schools (Moyo and Perumal 2019), and these schools were deprived of access to basic educational facilities before the emergence of the pandemic. P1 elaborated on the schools being under-resourced and leading in an underprivileged community:

P1: "The school faces limited resources, high class sizes, and ineffective online teaching due to the lack of gadgets and smartphones among the disadvantaged community."

Extending to this, P2 and P3 commented:

P2: "The township school's lack of uniforms, reliance on donations, lack of finances, and easy availability to inexpensive cell phones and PPE presented obstacles for its online learning."

P3: "Access to healthcare was challenging, leading to job losses and poverty strikes in underprivileged communities. Parents struggled to afford gadgets, and deciding between food and data was challenging."

P4 stated that they are lagging in terms of resources: "The lack of a computer centre and white boards, along with limited access to software and data for learners, contributes to a significant lag in the fourth industrial revolution."

P5 and P6 stated that online teaching did not take place because of a lack of resources:

P5: "The lack of online resources and limited communication with parents hindered online teaching, particularly for learners from informal settlements with no internet connectivity."

P6: "Most learners in our schools come from informal settlements with limited resources, including airtime, data, and devices, and unemployment rates are high due to the COVID-19 pandemic."

One of a nation's main socioeconomic pillars is believed to be its educational system. The ability to engage in the economy requires skills and knowledge that can only be acquired through education. School closures hindered learning and exacerbated inequality, particularly for learners from underprivileged communities (Nkosi and Moyo 2023). Even though certain South African schools could implement emergency online instruction, access was disproportionately biased in favour of the socioeconomically advantaged (Brough et al. 2020). Due to varying access to education, including electricity and technology, data and parental skills for homeschooling, the

underprivileged were forced to face the impact of unequal access to education (Ravele and Moyo 2023). The effects of COVID-19 highlighted the inequities that already existed in the South African educational system and society at large. Only a few South African households had access to the internet.

Strategies Employed by Female School Leaders During the Pandemic

Leadership approaches

The style of leadership employed by the principal of a school influences the school's culture (Moyo, Perumal and Hallinger 2020). During the interviews, participants indicated that their adaptive nature in using different leadership styles assisted them during the COVID-19 pandemic. This supports Khumalo's (2021) claim that female leaders' adaptability enables them to switch between leadership styles according to the task at hand, the resources at their disposal and the shortcomings and strengths of the staff members they lead. These were the responses from the participants:

P1: "Instructional leadership involves instructing SMT meetings based on director's meetings, allowing information sharing, and promoting democracy. Leaders must lead by example, be resilient, and direct to give direction."

P2: "My leadership style was influenced by delegation, which varies depending on the situation. I use a combination of democratic and autocratic styles depending on the situation."

P3: "I used democratic leadership style, where every educator is given a chance to come up with solutions. But also, sometimes you must tell them what to do."

P4: "I would say you have more of the democratic leadership. I do. It's instructional as well. Depending on the situation."

P5: "I will either be a democratic or an autocratic leader, democratic, when I must come to the foreground for the learners in the classroom, which had sustained everlasting damages emotionally, academically due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also an autocratic leader."

When questioned as to whether their leadership style changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, they mentioned it had not changed as they are always leading in a crisis due to (1) being female and (2) leading in a poor community. The responses were as follows:

P1: "It stayed the same. I am always in crisis mode. Education is education. You must be strict and go on with education. I also get a lot of criticism. Sometimes they are building you. You must take the negative and change it to the positive."

P4: "I realised the style doesn't matter what the crisis is that comes with this style of really involving people relying on your team, staying informed. Always. It's not something new that now came because of COVID-19 it's because I already had those skills that enabled me to carry me myself through the COVID-19 time."

Participants' perspectives are consistent with Mestry and Schmidt's (2012) argument that South Africa's complicated and multi-layered past has more to do with South African female leaders' experiences and challenges than gender stereotypes. According to Ravele and Moyo (2023), during the COVID-19 period, racial, gender and socioeconomic class inequalities grew more pronounced in the South African education system. This is especially true in impoverished and disadvantaged schools as many continue to struggle from the legacy of overcrowded classrooms, appalling conditions and a shortage of resources. It was challenging to ensure continuous educational activities during the pandemic due to a lack of resources. This meant that teaching and learning came to a halt. Educational leaders could not ensure a safe environment for teachers and learners as overcrowding meant social distancing could not be observed. This proved challenging, especially as social distancing became a deciding factor in the decision to reopen schools (Dube 2020).

Social Conventions

Social conventions such as sympathy, empathy and assertiveness emerged as strong leadership traits needed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants contended that navigating their schools through the COVID-19 pandemic required them to be more sympathetic and empathic but also assertive at times. According to Shepherd and Mohohlwane (2022), during a crisis, school leaders should adopt a compassionate philosophy.

P4 explained: "Remember this was a fear-driven situation. So sometimes you just need to listen to them in the morning when they tell you, we are afraid, or my neighbour has died. The COVID-19 was very real. People saw their neighbours dying. So then one needs to have sympathy. You need to have empathy."

P6 echoed the sentiment by saying: "You must be supportive and sympathetic and not panic. You must provide guidance. You must open the communication channel. There must be honesty and trust. And lastly, you must have patience."

P5 agreed by saying: "There must be a sense of collegiality. I've become a good communicator and a good listener. I am more sensitive to a situation of a person and am more supportive."

On being assertive, participants related the following:

P1: "So, with the love and the respect come, the firmness. And strictness. You must check punctuality of teachers, punctuality of learners."

P2: "I'm patient and easy to communicate with. I cannot say being friends with my colleagues. I'm not friend, but I'm a critical friend to them."

The data revealed that although social conventions such as sympathy and empathy displayed by female leaders are seen as being weak due to stereotypical gender thinking (Moyo, Perumal and Hallinger 2020), they proved to be a strength during the COVID-19 pandemic. This supports the view of Crosslin and Bailey (2021) that women are resilient leaders who possess higher levels of skills than their male counterparts and can thrive during times of adversity.

Collaboration and Teamwork

Participants believed that working together and sharing duties were effective ways to lead their schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data shows that curriculum-related matters were discussed whenever there were meetings.

P1 related: "We worked together as a team. Teamwork and co-operation are very important. Having to listen to every view given, taking advice from other colleagues."

P2 agreed by saying: "Teamwork. I believe in teamwork and developing educators. We discuss and come up with a solution."

Alternate responses which augmented the importance of teamwork and collaboration included:

P4: "Teamwork and collaboration really helped. I didn't work on my own. I involved my team in everything that needed to be done. We sat and brainstormed how we were going to do the rotation. We looked at all sorts of options and then came up with a proposal."

P5: "Together with SMT and the COVID-19 Committee we developed the COVID-19 policy. We also ensured that there is always PPE for the protection of our learners and staff. The SMT were planning together for the rotational teaching."

Working together effectively may enhance a principal's efficacy during a pandemic (Leithwood, 2019). In this study, the leadership of female principals was tested in the COVID-19 era. Teamwork is all about team members cooperating to achieve organisational goals. According to McLeod and Dusky (2021), principalship is about teamwork, adaptability and empowering stakeholders to achieve better performance. Principals are crucial in creating a climate that encourages teacher collaboration (Moyo, Perumal and Hallinger 2020). Collaboration necessitates that co-workers actively contribute to a common objective, assume responsibility for outcomes and demonstrate

themselves as team members. Collaboration and teamwork are interrelated. Female principals have a strong sense of responsibility and exhibit cooperative behaviours and collaborative abilities.

Conclusion

This study explored how female school leaders in disadvantaged schools navigated gendered and professional roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools. The qualitative study discovered that females who hold leadership positions in disadvantaged schools encounter significant obstacles in pursuing their roles. Although there has been substantial progress in the number of women holding leadership roles in schools, patriarchal culture and gender stereotypes continue to prevail. Female leaders were adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic because they had to operate under difficult circumstances, as many perceived them as incapable of leading the schools during a crisis like the pandemic. Due to a lack of resources and technology, the pandemic had a severe impact on effective teaching and learning in disadvantaged primary schools, making it more difficult to lead schools – particularly when combined with the constraints faced by female school leaders. This study elucidated the difficulties faced by female school leaders rather than making an argument for complacency in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. The data revealed that COVID-19 exacerbated the difficulties faced by female school leaders in disadvantaged schools, but it also demonstrated their resilience in the face of the pandemic. Lastly, there is the optimistic conviction that the glass ceiling can be broken.

The first limitation of the study was participant withdrawals, which resulted in a reduced data pool and a broader sample of teachers, learners, parents, and the community, which would have improved understanding of female school management during COVID-19. However, the data collected through individual interviews and document reviews had limitations, but it provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by female leaders and strategies for resolving these issues. The study highlights leadership challenges faced by female school leaders due to gender stereotypes and patriarchy. It recommends extensive training in gender sensitivity and resolving issues through seminars, roadshows, and workshops to foster a culture of reduced gender issues. The Department of Basic Education established support networks for female principals in 2013, but these networks were limited to urban areas and neglected rural and township leaders. To empower female school leaders, the department should extend these networks to deputy principals. They should offer psycho-emotional support to school leaders during uncertain times, focusing on their wellness and benefiting both staff and the community. Launching an e-learning professional development campaign would equip school leaders and teachers for the 21st-century classroom, especially in less advantaged settings with limited technological tools, digital literacy, and technical experience, to mitigate the impact of pandemics. Support networks such as psycho-emotional support should be established, and viable resources should be distributed to quintile two schools. Training and development are recommended to resolve gender-related challenges and

the development and enhancement of 21st-century classroom management skills. The Department of Basic Education should provide internet connections and technological equipment to teachers and learners, particularly in underprivileged schools. Provision of internet connections and technological equipment to teachers and learners, particularly in underprivileged schools ensures ongoing teaching and learning. Future research should compare female leaders in disadvantaged public schools in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic with those in affluent schools, focusing on their experiences.

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