

Institutional Barriers Preventing Young Women from Ascending to Leadership Positions in Primary Schools: Evidence from Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Although women make up almost 70% of the primary school teaching workforce in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe, they hold fewer than 20% of primary schools' headship. This qualitative study examines institutional barriers that prevent young women (ages 25–35) from advancing into leadership positions within primary schools. Using a combination of semi-structured interview and focus group discussion methodologies with 60 total participants (young women who are or aspire to be leaders in their schools, as well as school administrators/ministerial officials), this research utilised feminist organisational theory and social role theory as the theoretical frameworks for its data analysis. The thematic findings indicate that there were three institutional barriers that restrict the advancement of young women into leadership roles: male dominated networks/opaque decision making systems that exclude women from accessing informal sources of influence; rigid organisational policies based upon traditional masculine work culture that do not provide flexible working arrangements to meet the changing needs of individual teachers' lives; and unclear career paths for young women which are subjectively determined allowing for the operation of unconscious bias in the selection process. Together these barriers produce synergistic effects that maintain gendered inequalities even when formal policy commitments have been made to eliminate such inequalities. Overall, the results of this research provide empirical evidence regarding how the structure of organisations produces and maintains gender inequalities in leadership at the primary education level in Zimbabwe, and provide a foundation for evidence-based institutional transformation and support for Sustainable Development Goal 5.

Keywords: Career progression, Culture, Educational leadership, Feminist organizational theory, Gender inequality, Institutional barriers, Primary schools, Zimbabwe

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Gender inequality exists in educational leadership across the world. Despite a global commitment to equality through policy, gender and race continue to be predictors of delayed promotions to the position of school heads when qualifications and experience are held constant according to Bailes and Guthery (2020), who utilised survival analysis to examine 4,689 assistant principals. In contrast to previous studies that have attributed inequality to

individual deficits, this study revealed structural inequality in promotion systems and that women experience slower access to the school leadership positions through institutionalised mechanisms. Weiner, Garrett-Walker, Strickland, and Burton (2022) conducted a qualitative intersectional study of 20 Black women principals and identified how informal networks, gatekeeping, credibility tests, biased panels and other "rules of the game" produce exclusion while some practices can interrupt discrimination. Thompson and Stokes (2023) interviewed women principals about their pathways to Australian secondary school leadership and identified barriers such as gendered expectations, lack of access to "stretch" roles, unequal mentoring, and work-life pressures during middle leadership stages. These authors structured an understanding of the inequality faced by women leaders using the pipeline stages of institutionally-filtered candidate flow.

Bush, Kirezi, Ashford, and Glover (2022) conducted a systematic overview of barriers to the leadership of women principals in secondary education in 54 African countries. They concluded that barriers to women's participation in secondary school leadership exist at both organisational levels (e.g., double standards in recruitment and selection processes, social norms regarding domestic responsibilities) and personal levels such as self-exclusion due to perceived lack of preparation to lead, context-specific factors. Komiti and Moorosi (2020) used narrative inquiry to investigate the experiences of eight women principals in Lesotho. They found that women's trajectories to school leadership were influenced by family expectations, willingness to take on leadership, organisational opportunity structures, and broader cultural-economic conditions; they also developed theoretical insights into how institutions create opportunities or limit them for women leaders. Alemu (2024) conducted a multi-site qualitative study of primary school leadership in Ethiopia. She demonstrated that women leaders face institutional norms and limits, and that policies intended to reduce inequality will fail to do so unless there is also community engagement and systemic support.

Specifically, within Zimbabwe, Moyo and Perumal (2020) conducted a systematic review of 22 articles focused on Zimbabwean education system and synthesised literature addressing patriarchy, access barriers, policy-practice gaps, organisational culture, and context constraints and highlighted knowledge gaps. Moyo, Perumal, and Hallinger (2020) synthesised 25 qualitative studies on women leading schools in Zimbabwe. They consolidated evidence on the barriers that women encounter in leading schools including barriers related to gendered authority, discrimination, support systems that constrain women, and resource conditions. Dzingirai and Chauraya (2023) conducted an interpretive phenomenological study of the experiences of 15 senior women leaders in Masvingo Province. They identified stereotypes, expectations of what constitutes an ideal leader, normative constraints, and scrutiny of women's bodies that deter women from pursuing leadership positions, and explain why many young women choose to self-select out of potential leadership opportunities because they know that institutions reward traditional images of gendered leadership

Although research on women in educational leadership has grown significantly over the past decade, large gaps remain. For example, while numerous studies have documented the underrepresentation of women in educational leadership positions, a few studies have isolated specific mechanisms of institutionalisation within primary schools that shape young women's progression into these leadership positions. Specifically, research is needed on institutional mechanisms such as promotion practices, panel behaviour, informal sponsorship, and acting appointments that impact young women's progression into leadership (Bush et al., 2022). Even if some research provides recommendations for interventions, such as mentoring and transparency in selection criteria, evidence of the efficacy of these approaches is limited and a few studies evaluate which intervention strategies are most effective in increasing progression, retention, and effectiveness of young women in leadership (Alemu, 2024). An explicitly "young women" focus is often missing in

research studies, as research typically focuses on women leaders in general terms without isolating by age or career stage, although early career constraints may vary significantly among younger women.

Gender equality has formally been a part of the government policy for Zimbabwe; however, though there are more females employed as teachers in the primary sector than males, female school heads comprise less than 20% of all school heads at the Bulawayo Metropolitan Province (ZIMSTAT, 2022). The persistence of this difference in the proportion of female and male school heads, shows that formal equality laws and regulations will be insufficient to remove structural obstacles to career advancement for women in their roles as leaders in institutions of education. Research internationally has shown that the process of promotion is delayed by gender and it is due to structural issues within organisations rather than the capabilities of individuals. There have been previous studies conducted in Zimbabwe regarding the institutional barriers and discrimination faced by women and the lack of institutional support in relation to gendered authority with regards to careers, but the studies did not adequately address the ways that institutional practices influence the career path of women in the primary school sector. Additionally, there was little empirical research related to the processes of promoting and supporting young professional women in the early to mid-stages of their careers. The current gap in knowledge restricts the ability to develop evidence-based interventions and may promote a culture that places blame on the individual woman, rather than the systems and institutions that create inequality. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- How do institutional power structures and informal networks influence young women's access to leadership positions in educational institutions?
- In what ways do organizational cultures and work practices constrain young women's leadership aspirations and progression?
- How do career progression systems and selection processes affect young women's leadership advancement in education?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Organizational Policies and Promotion Practices within Primary Schools

Bailes and Guthery (2020) demonstrated using administrative data to show that the timeline to promote individuals to the school head position is not equitable because even after adjusting for the experience and credentials of candidates, women were delayed from entering the pipeline to become school heads at a systematic level suggesting there are structural problems with promotion processes instead of "deficits" in individual candidates. Martínez and others (2021) identified the gender gap through both sides of the prism of women's own self-selection based on their expectations and family obligations, and organisationally-based obstacles such as biased selection criteria, informal sponsorship and the lack of transparency within the promotion process which provides an important link between school promotion practices and overall institutional design. Abonyi, Boateng, Boateng, and Ansaah (2024) although focused on Ghana provided globally applicable analysis focusing on appointment systems and discussed how appointment culture and performance evaluation intersect with gender bias, while they argued that changing attitudes and criteria of appointment processes would be key to increasing equity in access to leadership positions.

Bush et al. (2022) synthesised evidence across Africa illustrating that barriers to access to leadership are often institutionalised through informal gatekeeping, biased selection processes and limited opportunities for professional growth and development in Africa, although the quality of the evidence varied across countries. Komiti and Moorosi (2020) used narrative inquiry and illustrated how women's career advancement are influenced by the

organisational opportunity for them, their network access and institutional "rules of the game" providing a useful approach for understanding that promotion can depend on factors beyond formal policies, that is, sponsorship, leadership identity, and the availability of a pathway to advance. Alemu (2024), specifically focused on primary schools, illustrated how women leaders encounter discrimination that is embedded in the institutional routine, and showed how institutional barriers exist in the form of staff resistance, community expectations and unequal authority, and demonstrated how "access to promotions" is tied to the treatment of women who have already been placed in leadership positions.

Moyo, Perumal and Hallinger (2020) synthesised evidence from Zimbabwe that illustrated how structural barriers influence women's movement into and performance in leadership positions, and highlighted how institutional and systemic constraints such as gatekeeping, lack of support and legitimacy challenges to leadership are common barriers to women advancing into leadership positions directly related to promotion and appointment dynamics. Dzimiri (2022) illustrated how women who are recently appointed to leadership positions feel like outsiders despite having officially been appointed, and suggested that promotion involves not just being able to access a job or promotion, but also whether the institution recognises woman leader's authority, allocates resources to support the woman leader and evaluates the leadership competence. Moyo (2022) framed Zimbabwe's gender inequality in educational leadership as institutional rather than individual, and described how women's access to leadership is shaped by formal structures and informal school-level practices, such as bias, norms, and lack of support.

Across the global literature, promotion barriers generally occur as pipeline delays, biased criteria, and non-transparent selection (Bailes & Guthery, 2020; Martínez et al., 2021). Studies that focus on Africa highlight how informal networks and community politics exacerbate the gatekeeping at the organisational level (Bush et al., 2022; Komiti & Moorosi, 2020). The evidence from Zimbabwe highlights the importance of gatekeeping and legitimacy challenges that women face after being appointed, indicating that "getting promoted" does not necessarily mean "having the ability to lead" (Moyo et al., 2020; Dzimiri, 2022).

Institutional Cultures, Norms, and Gendered Expectations Influencing Leadership Progression

Lumby and Moorosi (2022) suggest that institutional cultures generate inequalities in addition to formally equal policies, to identify the manner in which gendered values in schools determine "who appears to be a leader", how women are evaluated and why there may be stagnant representation without altering daily organisation practices. The research of Massouti, Shaya, and Qareiny (2024) illustrate how social-cultural expectations combine with leadership practices, how they influence what women can accomplish and how they are appraised, and that advancement in leadership is based upon norms and acceptance and not only qualification, and to provide pathways for connecting culture to performance results. Although Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi (2023) did not specifically examine schooling, their strong theoretical and empirical analysis provides support for mechanisms such as stereotype-based competence judgments, double standards, and "the motherhood penalty" applicable in school leadership settings.

In addition to systems for promoting candidates, the study of Bush et al. (2022) demonstrated that cultural beliefs and gender norms were constant obstacles throughout various African contexts. Documenting common and repeated themes including leadership being coded as masculine, women encountering credibility challenges and the "teaching as feminised, leadership as masculine" contradiction. Komiti and Moorosi (2020) illustrated how women who become leaders must navigate gendered expectations both internally within the institution and externally in their communities, and through the narrative of the women provided insight into how the normative expectations shaped identity, confidence, and

perceived legitimacy, and how it influenced whether women would be encouraged, nominated, and supported into leadership positions. Alemu (2024) utilised an important perspective, situated the gendered expectations within the routine of primary school, illustrating how the gendered expectations influenced staff cooperation, authority, and community acceptance, and highlighted that women who serve as leaders often undertake "gender justice work" in addition to typical leadership responsibilities, which influences burnout and choices related to career progression.

The research of Moyo et al. (2020) illustrated that women leaders in Zimbabwe experience both cultural and structural barriers concurrently, and that the gendered expectations appeared in the attitudes of staff, community reaction, and gatekeeping in the institution, which supports the argument that gender norms are not solely societal "problems" but also internalized and reproduced within school organizations. Dzimir (2022) demonstrated that institutional culture can marginalise women leaders through the process of subtle exclusion, which undermines confidence and authority, and explains why progression will remain stalled regardless of the appointment of women as leaders due to resistance from others, additional scrutiny, and limited access to informal leadership networks, which directly supports "gendered expectations" as institutional barriers. Moyo (2022) framed the inequality in Zimbabwean leadership as rooted in institutionalised gender norms and power, which supports arguments regarding stereotypes, role conflict, and the social construction of leadership legitimacy, and was useful for demonstrating why focus should be placed on institutional conditions instead of attributing lack of ambition to women.

Internationally, norms function through stereotypes, double standards, and unevenly distributed care responsibilities that affect how women are perceived as "qualified to be a leader" (Lumby & Moorosi, 2022; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). In African contexts, the norms are increased in magnitude by community-mediated legitimacy and the continuation of male-identified leadership ideals (Bush et al., 2022; Alemu, 2024). Zimbabwean data has aligned well but has additionally illustrated how women can be institutionally positioned as symbolic leaders without having actual authority via exclusion and increased scrutiny (Dzimir, 2022; Moyo et al., 2020).

Institutional Strategies and Support Mechanisms to Enhance Advancement

Practical strategies are suggested by Massouti et al. (2024), through an examination of how distributed instructional leadership may help create a legitimate climate for women leaders, who operate in difficult socio-cultural contexts; which will assist in creating the foundation for the development of collaborative leadership, data-driven decision-making, and organisational learning. Rather than simply allowing women to struggle with hostile environments alone, these authors support the idea of developing interventions that strengthen collaborative leadership, data-driven decision-making, and organisational learning.

Alemu (2024) specifically identifies several strategies that women school heads have utilised to address challenges including: forming alliances, negotiating community power, and challenging discriminatory routines; and also suggests that school level interventions such as peer support networks, the establishment of a structural authority base from higher offices, and developing institutional responses to staff resistance will be necessary to support women school heads.

Although primarily in a diagnostic study, Bailes and Guthery (2020) identify direct reform levers such as transparent promotion pathways, consistent criteria, monitoring of promotion timelines, and accountability for bias in selection; and argue that "support mechanisms" must include system-wide HR reforms that go beyond leadership training workshops.

Bush and Glover (2025) provide an overview of leadership preparation programmes across Africa and indicate that while some countries have established formal leadership

development programmes, many other countries continue to rely on unstructured and low-quality leadership development programs; and suggest that "capacity building" is uneven and rarely institutionalised. The authors further indicate that formal preparation programmes, mentoring, and professional development tailored to the specific context, can serve as useful strategies for improving the quality of leadership development in Africa.

Komiti and Moorosi (2020) indicate that when institutions provide women with access to networks, sponsorship, and leadership opportunities prior to their promotion, they are able to develop their careers more successfully; and therefore suggest that structured succession planning, leadership shadowing, and transparent nomination processes can serve as useful strategies for increasing the number of women in leadership positions.

Abonyi et al. (2024) provide empirical support for appointment-focused strategies that include changing criteria, challenging cultural beliefs about women leaders, and using evidence on women's leadership performance to shift attitudes, and therefore provide strong arguments for institutional communication strategies, reducing bias in panels, and implementing equity-focused appointment policies to prevent informal norms from shaping selection.

Moyo et al. (2020) synthesise multiple studies conducted in Zimbabwe that consistently point to institutional support needs, including leadership development, mentoring, stronger professional networks, and organisational cultures that recognise women's authority; and provide strong evidence for institutional support needs based upon aggregated findings from multiple studies rather than relying solely on single case studies.

Moyo (2022) provides support for Zimbabwe-specific institutional strategies that extend beyond training, including confronting gatekeepers, strengthening equity enforcement in leadership appointment systems, and combating informal discrimination; and provides justification for reforms that make promotion processes fair and provide institutional support that is visible and institutional-based rather than reliant on individual coping strategies.

Dzimiri (2022) indicates that concrete supports for newly appointed women leaders include: induction, mentoring, and building legitimacy within the organisation; and argues that early stage support is critical since exclusion and scepticism typically intensify during entry points into leadership; and therefore supports strategies including structured on boarding, coaching, and protective policy enforcement when resistance occurs.

The global body of research indicates that support for women leaders should include hard system reforms including transparent promotion criteria and bias monitoring in addition to the "empowerment" rhetoric (Bailes & Guthery, 2020). Studies in Africa emphasise that effective strategies require formalised leadership development pipelines and network access due to the fact that informal systems often exclude women (Bush & Glover, 2025; Komiti & Moorosi, 2020). The body of research focused on Zimbabwe aligns with this emphasis on formalised leadership development pipelines and network access but places greater emphasis on post-appointment support and legitimacy indicating that induction and institutional backing are equally or even more important than pre-promotion training.

The research is filled with a pattern of gaps across different areas of study; there are many studies that explain general underrepresentation of young women into educational leadership roles, but few have focused specifically on the institutional barriers within primary schools that impact young women's career progression, that is, promotion practices, panel behaviour, informal sponsorship, and acting appointments. There is an abundance of research across Africa that has highlighted commonalities in countries and regions regarding women's advancement into education leadership roles; however, most of these studies have provided limited comparable data across each country and region. The bulk of Zimbabwean research has demonstrated strong findings on the barriers experienced by women and their

lived experiences; however, there is need for additional rigorous evidence of how specific institutional rules and cultures function at the primary school level and what types of targeted support work in practice.

In addition to a lack of evidence regarding how specific institutional rules and cultures function, another area where the research lacks sufficient evidence is in the form of evaluation of interventions designed to improve the number of young women advancing into leadership positions in primary schools. As such, many organisations recommend mentoring, training, and transparent promotion criteria; however, very few organisations have conducted empirical evaluations on which institutional strategies are effective in increasing the number of young women in leadership positions in primary schools and/or improving their retention and effectiveness in those roles. A few studies demonstrate that women leaders develop strategies to navigate discriminatory environments; however, when developing these strategies, it often shifts the responsibility for addressing the system from the institution to the individual leader. Thus, it leaves the systems and structures of the organisation unchanged.

A fourth area of research that has been lacking is the use of a distinct lens for young women. A majority of the research identifies women leaders as large or broad groups of women without differentiating by age or career stage. However, career stage can be particularly influential in understanding the types of constraints faced by young women leaders due to the fact that career stage can interact with existing norms and promotion systems in ways that determine which women will receive nominations and support to advance through the pipeline and which women will withdraw from the pipeline altogether. The importance of a "young woman" lens is critical for understanding the constraints faced by young women who aspire to become education leaders in Zimbabwean primary schools.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Organisational Theory

Feminist organisational theory, advanced by authors such as Acker in both 1990 and 2006, illustrates that the structural and cultural aspects of an organisation are shaped by a gendered division of labour, gendered power, gendered symbolic representations, and gendered identity. In other words, feminist organisational theory shows that many organisations have institutionalised systems of discrimination against women in terms of recruitment, promotions, and leadership opportunities which lead to a systematic advantage for men, leading to a continuous cycle of gender-based institutional barriers that limit women from advancing into leadership roles. Therefore, this theoretical framework demonstrates that institutional barriers toward women in the workplace are not the result of accidents or happenstance, but rather the results of intentional actions and decisions that need to be addressed with similar deliberateness to remove.

Social Role Theory

Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012) posits that socialised roles for males and females contribute to gender-based differences in suitability for a leader position. The socialised roles for each gender dictate what is perceived as suitable for leaders. Since women are typically perceived as being communal, they may be viewed as less agentic than their male counterparts. As a result of these perceptions, women are less likely to be promoted into leadership positions. This socialisation creates an incongruence between an individual's sex and their role as a leader.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research used a qualitative case study methodology to be able to have an in-depth analysis of the institutional barriers that exist in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province's primary school system. Creswell and Poth (2018) note that case studies are very good at capturing multiple layers of context which affect complex social phenomena. By using this type of methodology the researchers were able to capture factors that are unique to Bulawayo, that

reflect the socio-cultural, institutional and individual aspects of the young women's experiences as leaders. Case study designs allow for triangulation with multiple qualitative data sources to add richness to the findings, by capturing different viewpoints (Yin, 2018).

The researchers recruited 60 participants using purposive sampling in order to capture a variety of viewpoints regarding women's leadership in primary schools. Purposive sampling was, especially, appropriate for this qualitative research because it allowed the researchers to deliberately select participants based upon their experiences that were relevant to the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2015). Additionally, snowball sampling was used to recruit school administrators and Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) officials who could provide an institutionally based perspective on the leadership related challenges that exist in primary schools.

The participants were divided into three groups. The first group, Young Women in Leadership, consisted of 20 young women aged 25 to 35 years old, all of whom held formal positions of authority at their schools, such as headmistress or deputy head. The second group, Aspiring Young Women Leaders, also consisted of 20 young women aged 25 to 35 years old, but these women were seen as having the potential to be future leaders in their schools. The third group, School administrators and MoPSE officials, consisted of 20, that is, eight School Heads, eight Deputy School Heads, one District Schools Inspector, two Schools Inspectors and one Human Resources Officer. By dividing the participants into these three categories, the researchers were able to capture the day-to-day experiences of the young women who face institutional barriers to achieving leadership roles within their schools while also gaining insight into the experiences of the people who make decisions about how resources are allocated and policies implemented at the level of the organisation.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions over four weeks. Semi-structured interviews provided flexibility, allowing asking follow-up questions to gain deeper insights into participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Focus group discussions with aspiring young women leaders created supportive settings for participants to share and compare experiences. Interview guides were designed exploring themes around leadership experiences, challenges, and motivations. Focus group prompts encouraged discussing specific challenges in leadership roles, enabling capturing both shared and divergent views among participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Ethical approval was obtained from Zimbabwe Open University, followed by authorisation from the MoPSE. Participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality was maintained through using pseudonyms (YWL for young women leaders, AL for aspiring leaders, SA for school administrators, and MO for MoPSE officials). The right to privacy and voluntary participation was emphasised throughout the research process.

Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach was employed: familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing final analysis. This rigorous analytical process ensured systematic examination of qualitative data, revealing three major sub-themes under the broader theme of institutional barriers.

4. RESULTS

The thematic analysis revealed three interrelated institutional barriers that systematically constrain young women's advancement into leadership positions within educational institutions. These barriers are not isolated or incidental; rather, they are deeply embedded in organisational structures, cultures, and decision-making processes. The findings indicate that young women's leadership trajectories are shaped by male-dominated networks and opaque governance systems, inflexible organisational practices rooted in masculine norms, and unclear career progression pathways characterised by subjective and non-transparent

selection criteria. Across all themes, participants consistently described institutions that formally espouse gender equality while informally reproducing gendered power relations through everyday practices and unspoken rules.

Male-Dominated Networks and Opaque Decision-Making Structures

Despite women's numerical dominance in teaching and middle-management roles, participants reported that educational leadership remains controlled by entrenched male networks that dominate decision-making spaces. These networks operate largely through informal relationships and long-standing alliances that systematically exclude young women from access to power and influence. Young Women Leader participant YWL-08 offered a detailed institutional critique:

The power structures in our educational institutions remain fundamentally male-dominated despite numerical presence of women in teaching positions. School development committees, governing bodies, district education boards, and ministry leadership are predominantly composed of men who often share similar backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. These networks operate through informal relationships, shared social activities, and mutual support systems that naturally exclude women.

Several participants emphasised that exclusion was rarely overt or formally acknowledged, making it difficult to challenge. Aspiring Leader participant AL-06 explained:

You are never told directly that you can apply for the post. It is just that information about opportunities circulates in spaces where women are not present. Decisions are discussed over drinks, at sports clubs, or during informal gatherings where young women are either not invited or feel uncomfortable attending.

School Administrator participant SA-03 further elaborated on how these networks shape career advancement:

The informal networks that significantly influence leadership appointments and career advancement are largely male-dominated and operate through relationships built over decades of shared professional and social experiences. These networks provide access to information about opportunities, informal mentorship, and advocacy for advancement that women simply do not have access to.

The participants also noted that these networks reinforce homogeneity in leadership by privileging familiarity over competence. Young Women Leader participant YWL-11 stated:

When leadership positions open, the discussion is not really about who is most capable. It is about who is known, who is trusted, and who 'fits in'. Unfortunately, fitting in often means being male, older, and socially connected to those already in power.

The Ministry Official participant MO-02 acknowledged that even formally inclusive structures continue to privilege male voices:

Our decision-making structures, while formally inclusive, operate in ways that inadvertently privilege male perspectives and experiences. Meeting schedules, communication styles, and decision-making processes often reflect masculine organisational cultures that may be uncomfortable or inaccessible for women, particularly young women.

Inflexible Organisational Practices and Masculine Work Cultures

Participants consistently described organisational practices that reflect rigid, masculinised assumptions about leadership, particularly regarding availability, mobility, and work-life boundaries. These practices disproportionately disadvantage young women, especially,

those with caregiving responsibilities. Aspiring Leader participant AL-09 provided a comprehensive analysis as she states that:

Educational leadership positions are structured around traditional masculine career patterns that assume leaders have minimal domestic responsibilities and can prioritise work commitments above all. Leadership positions require extensive travel for meetings and training, irregular hours for school events and crisis management, and constant availability for emergency situations.

Young Women Leader participant YWL-05 elaborated on the lived consequences of these expectations:

The expectation that leaders should be available 24/7 creates significant challenges for women with family responsibilities. School emergencies, community meetings, and professional development opportunities often occur during evenings, weekends, and school holidays when women are expected to prioritise family obligations.

Several participants stressed that institutional inflexibility was interpreted as a measure of commitment and competence. School Administrator participant SA-01 observed:

Our organisational culture still operates on assumptions about leadership that reflect traditional male career patterns. There is limited recognition that different leadership approaches might be equally effective, that flexible work arrangements could enhance rather than compromise leadership effectiveness, or that diverse perspectives and experiences could strengthen institutional performance.

Young Women Leader participant YWL-03 highlighted how these norms discourage women from aspiring to leadership:

You begin to question whether leadership is even realistic for you. Not because you lack ability, but because the system is not designed for someone with multiple responsibilities. Eventually, many capable women self-select out.

Unclear Career Progression Pathways and Subjective Selection Processes

A third major theme concerned the absence of transparent and structured leadership pipelines. Thus, the participants reported unclear criteria for advancement, inconsistent promotion practices, and heavy reliance on subjective judgement. Aspiring Leader participant AL-10 articulated this concern clearly:

The pathway from teaching to educational leadership is unclear, inconsistent, and often depends more on personal relationships than structured development or objective criteria. There is no systematic approach to identifying leadership potential, no clear progression milestones, and no transparent selection processes.

Likewise, the Ministry Official participant MO-04 acknowledged systemic weaknesses:

Our succession planning processes are inadequate and often reactive rather than proactive. We lack systematic approaches to identifying and developing emerging leaders, particularly women leaders. Most leadership appointments happen when positions become vacant, often with limited time for comprehensive evaluation or structured selection processes.

School Administrator participant SA-05 explained how subjectivity becomes embedded in formal procedures:

Selection processes for leadership positions, while formally structured, often incorporate subjective criteria that unconsciously favour male candidates. Concepts like 'leadership presence,' 'natural authority,' and 'command respect' are frequently

used in evaluations, but these terms often reflect masculine leadership stereotypes rather than objective leadership capabilities.

Young Women Leader participant YWL-07 described her own advancement as unplanned and unsupported:

My progression to leadership happened almost by accident rather than through systematic development. I was appointed to my current position primarily because other candidates were unavailable rather than because of deliberate succession planning or recognition of my potential.

Another participant, YWL-12, echoed this experience:

After appointment, there was no mentoring, no induction, and no guidance. It felt like being placed in a position without institutional backing, as if the system was waiting for you to fail.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings reveal how institutional barriers operate synergistically to maintain gender inequality despite formal policy commitments. The three identified barriers representing different dimensions of what Acker (1990, 2006) describes as gendered organisations where masculine norms define standards for leadership and advancement.

Male-dominated networks and decision-making structures create what research demonstrates as homo-social reproduction, where those in power tend selecting and promoting individuals resembling themselves (Weiner et al., 2022). This pattern proves particularly insidious because it operates largely through informal mechanisms appearing natural rather than discriminatory. The concentration of power among male stakeholders creates self-perpetuating cycles where men's dominance in leadership generates informal networks facilitating other men's advancement while systematically excluding women from critical information, relationships, and opportunities.

The inflexible organisational practices documented reflect broader patterns of what Lumby and Moorosi (2022) term institutional cultures that reproduce inequality even when formal equality policies exist. The expectation of constant availability and scheduling critical activities without consideration for family responsibilities effectively creates what appears gender-neutral standard but operates as a gendered barrier because women disproportionately bear domestic and caregiving responsibilities. This represents structural discrimination disadvantaging women not through explicit exclusion but through apparently neutral practices failing to accommodate diverse life patterns.

The unclear career progression pathways and subjective selection processes demonstrate how apparently meritocratic systems can perpetuate inequality through subtle biases and informal criteria. As Bush et al. (2022) observe, informal gatekeeping and biased selection processes constitute consistent barriers across African contexts. The use of subjective criteria like "leadership presence" or "natural authority" in evaluations creates opportunities for gender stereotypes to influence decisions while maintaining appearances of objective assessment.

These findings align with and extend existing literature in several important ways. First, they confirm global patterns of gender inequality in educational leadership while providing specific insights into how these patterns manifest in African contexts. The concentration of women in teaching roles yet their exclusion from senior leadership reflects what Komiti and Moorosi (2020) documented in Lesotho, where women's trajectories are shaped by organisational opportunity structures and institutional "rules of the game."

Second, the research demonstrates how institutional barriers intersect with cultural and social factors creating particularly challenging environments for young women. The male-dominated networks and gatekeeping practices align with what Moyo et al. (2020) synthesised across 25 qualitative Zimbabwe studies, consolidating evidence on barriers such as gendered authority challenges, discrimination, and constrained support systems.

Third, the findings contribute to theoretical understanding of how gendered organisations function. The inflexible practices privileging masculine career patterns while penalising those with different life circumstances reflect feminist organisational theory's concepts regarding gendered divisions of labour and power. The subjective selection processes enabling unconscious bias illustrate social role theory's predictions about role incongruity, whereby societal expectations about appropriate gender roles influence evaluations and promotion decisions (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

The findings extend feminist organisational theory by demonstrating how institutional barriers operate at multiple levels simultaneously through formal structures, informal networks, cultural assumptions, and individual experiences. This multi-level operation suggests effective interventions must similarly address multiple dimensions of organisational life rather than focusing on single factors.

The research also contributes to social role theory by showing how role incongruity manifests not only in individual interactions but through systemic organisational practices systematically disadvantaging women who cannot conform to masculine leadership norms. The documentation of how gendered expectations appear in staff attitudes, community reactions, and institutional gatekeeping demonstrates gender norms are not merely external "society issues" but are reproduced inside school organisations, as Moyo (2022) frames.

For educational institutions, findings indicate the need for comprehensive organisational transformation rather than incremental policy adjustments. Addressing male-dominated networks requires deliberate intervention creating inclusive decision-making structures and transparent communication channels, including requiring diverse representation on selection committees and establishing formal mentorship programmes.

Organisational inflexibility must be addressed through policy reforms accommodating diverse life circumstances, including implementing flexible working arrangements, scheduling critical meetings during regular hours, providing institutional childcare support, and recognising effective leadership can take diverse forms. This aligns with what Alemu (2024) demonstrates regarding the need for policy backing and systemic support.

Career progression pathways should become transparent and merit-based through structured leadership development programmes, clear advancement criteria, and objective evaluation processes minimising opportunities for unconscious bias. This requires moving from reactive appointment processes to proactive succession planning, deliberately identifying and developing diverse leadership talent, as Komiti and Moorosi (2020) advocate.

Finally, accountability mechanisms prove essential ensuring institutional reforms produce meaningful change rather than symbolic compliance. This includes regular monitoring of gender representation, assessment of organisational cultures, and consequences for institutions failing to make progress toward gender equality goals.

6. CONCLUSION

This study revealed how institutional barriers including male-dominated networks and opaque decision-making structures, inflexible organisational practices rooted in masculine work cultures, and unclear career progression pathways with subjective selection processes systematically prevent young women from ascending to leadership positions in primary schools in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province. These barriers operate synergistically

maintaining gender hierarchies despite formal policy commitments and despite women's qualifications and numerical dominance in teaching. The research demonstrates achieving gender equality in educational leadership requires fundamental institutional transformation rather than incremental adjustments or individual-focused interventions. Organisations should recognise their gendered nature and deliberately restructure practices, cultures, and power relations currently privileging masculine norms while disadvantaging women.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on findings, evidence-based recommendations include:

- The Public Service Commission of Zimbabwe should establish diverse representation requirements for selection committees to disrupt homo-social reproduction patterns.
- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should develop policies accommodating diverse life circumstances including flexible scheduling and institutional childcare support.
- The Public Service Commission of Zimbabwe should conduct regular organisational culture audits with mandatory training on unconscious bias.
- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should establish clear competency-based criteria for leadership appointments with structured succession planning processes.
- Pressure groups in Zimbabwe should create monitoring systems tracking progress on gender equity goals with consequences for institutions failing to demonstrate progress.
- The Government of Zimbabwe should allocate dedicated funding for women's leadership development programmes.

Future Research Directions

Several important areas for future research emerge. Longitudinal studies should track career trajectories of women leaders and aspiring leaders over time to understand how institutional barriers evolve and identify factors enabling successful advancement despite obstacles. Comparative research should be conducted across different provinces, countries, or educational levels to identify contextual factors either exacerbating or mitigating institutional barriers. Intervention evaluation should rigorously evaluate effectiveness of specific interventions designed to address institutional barriers, using mixed methods approach to assess both implementation processes and outcomes. Intersectional analysis should examine how institutional barriers intersect with other identity dimensions such as race, class, disability status creating unique challenges for different groups. Conducting comparative studies across different provinces to identify contextual factors either exacerbating or mitigating institutional barriers.

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