

Knowledge and Perceptions of Accelerated Advancement among Female Teachers in Chivi District of Masvingo Province in Zimbabwe: A Stumbling Block to Gender Equality?

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Abstract

Gender inequality is overwhelming injustice and a matter of concern facing the contemporary societies. Essentially, gender equality is a question of power. Efforts to increase the women cohort in headship of secondary schools through accelerated advancement mechanisms to eradicate gender inequality are currently underway in Zimbabwe. However, not much has been observed as regards how the targeted women respond to these initiatives. Through an exploratory case study of the said women in a district of Zimbabwe, this issue is explored. Thirty purposively sampled female teachers participated in this study through one-on-one semi structured interviews to interrogate their knowledge and perceptions on accelerated advancement to leadership of secondary schools. These participants were all eligible for promotion to headship of schools, but had not applied for advertised promotion posts. Data that was qualitatively analysed revealed that while the women were aware of these initiatives, they nevertheless perceived the same as a threat to their identity as African women, among other reasons, resulting in the initiatives not reaping the intended fruits, much to the incomprehension of initiators. The researchers recommend an intervention that may result in the realisation of the intended outcome. To achieve a new impetus towards gender equality, the government needs to increase efforts to engage all stakeholders to change entrenched and deep rooted attitudes about women's role and behaviour in society.

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Introduction

In Zimbabwe, there exists a low uptake of leadership posts by potential females (Muzvidziwa, 2012; Shava & Ndebele, 2014; Moyo & Prumal, 2019) and the education sector is not spared of this phenomenon (Chabaya, Rembe & Wadesango, 2009; Gutuza, 2016; Shava, Tlou & Mpofu, 2019). One of the avenues adopted by the Education Ministry to increase the female cohort in headship of secondary schools is Accelerated Advancement (AA), which in actual fact is accelerated affirmative action. In this paper, the researchers present knowledge levels and perceptions of AA among female teachers under study.

Female teachers' knowledge (i.e., understanding and awareness) and their perceptions (i.e., the ways in which they perceive AA) are important to establish because they shape female teachers' ability and drive to respond to AA. This study uses a bottom-up approach which seeks to gain insights on the referred to issues from eligible women beneficiaries. In this approach we immersed ourselves in the senior female teachers' work practices with the goal to draw up solutions in a bottom up way. The approach is called bottom up because our exploration was based on the data from senior female teachers' experiences. No study to date has targeted the phenomenon in the studied district. This is the gap that this study fills. It is against this background that the study examines what perceptions of AA exist among this group and how it influences uptake of leadership posts. The researchers are of the view that what female teachers in Chivi district know about AA and how they feel about it would influence their decisions about it.

AA of Women Explained

Accelerated advancement of women refers to expanded opportunities for women; promoting their participation in economic, social and political sectors in the society (Dugarova, 2018). It is a form of affirmative action (Islam & Zilenovsky, 2011) where there is a deliberate and conscious effort to increase the pace of promoting women to positions of power. Affirmative action refers to a proactive and mindful effort to amend disadvantages in the past and to expand the representation of the marginalised groups in leadership positions in the society (Wingrove, 1991). In this study, AA of women refers to an early advancement to a position of leadership achieved through speeded up eligibility to the post. AA promotes women's appointments to leadership posts earlier than normal. AA provisions assist the Government of Zimbabwe (through its latest constitution's resolve for gender inequality redress) to close the gender gap in leadership posts.

Advantages and Disadvantages of AA

There is a plethora of merits brought by AA. This section limits itself to some of these advantages. When females are promoted to leadership and treated as equal to males, then it can end the different gaps that we witness in our society. Gender gaps can be reduced in the public institutions such as schools, female leadership skills can be fully utilised and stereotypes can be halted (Hryniew & Vianna, 2018). In addition, AA allows women to chase their dreams. Through AA, women are offered opportunities to pursue leadership paths that may never have been considered without the support of the programme. Thus, AA efforts helps to break the glass ceiling that have held so many women back for far too long (Carli & Eagly, 2018). Finally, AA can be used as a strategy to remove the injustice and discrimination practices that left out women in socio-economic and political participation in the past (Brand & Stoltz, 2001). In that way, the circumstances of women at work places are thus improved as they are considered of value in school leadership.

Nevertheless, there are some disadvantages emanating from AA which should be treated with caution in order to influence eligible women to take up leadership positions in schools. According to Williams (2015), if AA is not systematically planned and implemented, it can promote discrimination in reverse. Rendering one person preferences over another because of their minority status instead of their professional qualifications and other deemed selection qualifications is wrong and may promote discrimination. Males may feel discriminated as well (Furtado, Moreira & Mota, 2020). Further, the general public and some teachers may take AA to

be window dressing change in which a small number of women are appointed without necessary skills and potentials. In such circumstances, the targeted female teachers may choose not to participate and refrain from taking up leadership positions.

International Perspective on Affirmative Action and the Zimbabwean Standpoints

Internationally, there are various affirmative action avenues adopted which share similarities to the course Zimbabwe has preferred to take. This section explores the affirmative action avenues of Australia, India and South Africa before turning to Zimbabwe.

In Australia at a government centralised level, measures to guarantee equal opportunity for women and to encourage affirmative action are enshrined in the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) for Women in the Workplace Act 1999. Private and public institutions in Australia are obliged by this act to annually submit details about their affirmative action programmes towards equal employment opportunity for women. Studies by Strachan & Burgess (2000) reveal that not much has been done in Australia to promote women into leadership of manufacturing, finance and educational institutions. Similarly, Bacchi (2004) notes that the federal level's power to impose affirmative action in workplaces is being impeded by the fact that voluntarism by an organization to enforce affirmative action is permitted. Accordingly, Bacchi (2004) claims that where organisations are left to undertake affirmative action following their own ways is problematic and consequently leaves women marginalised. On the other hand, accounts for persistent gender-based work-related segregation attributed the causes as emanating from women themselves (Ainsworth, Knox & O'Flynn, 2014). Women lacked the suitable initiative, drive, expertise and qualifications needed to advance to non-traditional and management roles, for instance, a large number of women are not interested in permanent positions or higher duties in Australia (Furtado, Moreira & Mota, 2020). Women have been stigmatised as incapable to lead and men considered as suitable and able leaders.

In the Indian context, research highlights that both men and women perceive that women who move into leadership of schools and higher education institutions as a result of affirmative action regularly face harassment, discrimination, and exclusion (United Nations, 2003; Agarwal, 2011; Kumari, 2014). This perception has a negative impact on women's motivation to take up leadership positions. In India, this is deeply caused by the cultural perception of gender-appropriate behaviour where patriarchal views and masculinity prescribe assumptions about who should be in positions of power and leadership. Women remain side-lined to domesticity, which negatively affects their probabilities of entering positions of power in education (Morley & Crossouard, 2015).

In South Africa, various studies have been undertaken to examine the status quo of women advancement as guided by affirmative action. Slater's (2014) study reveals that some beneficiaries were discounted by usage of affirmative action for advancement of women into leadership of higher education institutions. In terms of affirmative action implementation, the South African women perceived that it was blemished by corruption and favouritism in that some women were promoted to leadership though they were not capable to lead so that the institutions which were women led did not perform highly when compared to other male headed institutions (Archibong & Adejumo, 2015). This finding resonates well with Lihamba and Mwaipopo (2003), Morely (2014) and Hussein (2016) who posit that using affirmative action to advance women into leadership positions will preserve the stereotype that females are weak, inferior and less intelligent. Gendered stereotypes and perceptions that have been imposed in the African woman mind

impede AA of women in most African countries. In exploring the knowledge and perceptions of initiatives by African states to fight gender inequality, this study establishes the implication of engaging Zimbabwean female teachers to change and accept leadership positions.

Turning to Zimbabwe, typically affirmative action embraces undertakings to close the gap of women under representation in politics, economics and leadership of public institutions – schools included. In higher and tertiary institutions, a study by Mugweni, Mufanechiya & Dhlomo (2011) reveals that in some universities in Zimbabwe, affirmative action is perceived as best opportunity to advance female academics into powerful academic positions. This view aligns with the view by Chitsamatanga, Rembe & Rembe (2020) who reveal that lecturers in some universities perceive affirmative action as an appropriate avenue for giving females academics the chance to display their competences and take up leadership positions but should not be implemented as ‘tokenism’ to maintain excellence and standard in universities. In this setting, it is important that even in secondary schools, increase in the knowledge and perception of initiatives to advance women to educational leadership should be an impetus for women to change and accept leadership and contribute to gender equality.

The affirmative action policies that have been taken by Zimbabwe to promote and empower females have not fully achieved the equal representation of males and females in leadership of secondary schools (Chabaya, Rembe & Wadesango, 2009). The Public Service Circular No. 11 (1991:2), the Public Service Circular No.22 (1996:3) and the Public Service Circular No. 22 (1997:1) directed and recommended school heads to identify women who could be promoted to apply for school headship posts. The school heads could identify these suitable women through using performance appraisals, result based management and qualification details. AA (as a type of affirmative action) is speeding up the advancement of women in this endeavour by even reducing the eligibility requirements- say where one requires men of 10 years’ experience as a teacher, for females less number of years may be required. The number of female heads in secondary schools is still very low despite the well-articulated policies to achieve gender equality and accelerated advancement of women in educational leadership (Matope, 2012; Gutuza, 2015). The study by Gutuza (2015) reveals that most teachers who participated in the study had negative attitudes towards AA although the teachers believe that promotion of women allows the latter to be role models for the girl child. It is the opinion of the researchers that negative attitudes consequently influence female teachers’ perception of AA. The questions which come to the fore are: Are the female teachers knowledgeable of these AA endeavours? What are their perceptions to the initiatives?

In pursuit of achieving gender equality, the Zimbabwe government has joined the global village in planning and implementing policies that address gender differentiation. Implementation of AA of female teachers to school leadership has been entreated by the state to transform the school system in order to achieve gender equality. Nevertheless, the researchers’ opinion is that the success of transforming school leadership to embrace gender equality largely depends on female teachers’ knowledge and perceptions about AA by the state. Therefore, the underlying assumption that the school system is poised to create a milieu that permits the exercise of gender equality can be explored by an analysis of the female teachers’ knowledge and perceptions about accelerated advancement of women. Hence this study.

Research Questions

- i. How knowledgeable are the secondary school female teachers of affirmative action endeavours in Chivi District of Masvingo province in Zimbabwe?
- ii. How do senior secondary school female teachers perceive affirmative action initiatives in Chivi District of Masvingo province in Zimbabwe?

Methodological Issues for the Study

For the researchers to explore the knowledge and perceptions of accelerated advancement among female teachers, the qualitative approach in keeping with an interpretive paradigm was used. Creswell (2013) and Tilley (2019) are of the opinion that qualitative studies are obliging when the researcher wants to have a comprehension of a human phenomenon. The researchers were able to collect data in the form of words through the narrative and explanations from the information of participants. Qualitative research approach was used to comprehend the senior female teachers' knowledge and perceptions based on their experiences. This approach is affirmed by Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2004) who assert that in qualitative inquiry, the researcher pursues to comprehend individuals in terms of their own interpretation of their world. The study employed a case study research design as it enabled the researchers to study the female teachers' perceptions of AA in greater depth in order to reach a deep understanding (Creswell, 2013). The authors purposively sampled 30 senior female teachers drawn from 30 secondary schools out of the 42 secondary schools in Chivi District.

Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were used to gather data. The semi-structured interviews enabled the female teachers to present their own ways of defining the world-knowledge (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2004; Creswell, 2013). Additionally, the interviews permitted flexibility rather than rigidity of sequence of discussion and offered opportunity to female teachers to point out and follow up matters that might not have been incorporated in a predetermined structured schedule (Crossman, 2018; Creswell, 2013). All interviews were audio-tapped, then transcribed and formed interview transcripts which were used to analyse and interpret data. The analysis was based on emerging themes which were meant to provide insights and not generalisation as deemed in quantitative researches. In a bid to enhance the trustworthiness of the collected data, the second author independently analysed the data to achieve 'inter-code agreement' (Patton, 2015).

Findings and Discussions

A number of themes emerged from the qualitative data gathered. Female knowledgeability of accelerated advancement will be discussed first, followed by female teachers' attitudes towards affirmative action and accelerated advancement. Finally, the themes dealing with perceived challenges of accelerated advancement of female teachers are presented.

Female Teacher Knowledge Ability of Accelerated Advancement

Female teachers were asked on whether they were aware of AA. The following emerged: 24 female teachers (80%) did not have a full and clear cognisance of specific aspects about AA. The same teachers indicated that school heads apparently did not clearly explain to female teachers about the AA. Teacher Ibwe remarked;

AA is verbally talked about by our school heads. The heads are not as clear as what universities say regarding affirmative action where female students are admitted at lower cut off points than males into certain programmes (Teacher Ibwe-pseudonym).

The female teachers even complained that the circulars for promotion to deputy headship were not clear to reflect the AA parameters. The following comment reflects this idea;

The vacancy announcement circulars have a phrase to encourage women to apply. In fact, this common phrase is written in bold letters to say female teachers are encouraged to apply. This leaves a lot in explaining what AA entails (Teacher Choto).

Another teacher Mrs Mbava could not provide details to what she said was AA. Her remark revealed that she did not fully comprehend what AA meant;

AA is just a strategy by the government to encourage women to be in leadership positions. The problem is that we were not given literature so that we could read about the AA (Teacher Dabwa).

In staff meetings, our head talked about this AA on rare occasions. This left us with poor understanding of AA (Teacher Jecha).

The above responses shows that, generally, women beneficiaries of AA had inadequate knowledge about AA realm of leadership. This status was attributed to failure by the school leadership to clearly enlighten female teachers about the AA by the government.

In the interview held with female teachers, the researchers sought the opinions of the participants about AA and whether they were willing to adopt it in their practice. Twenty teachers (66.6%) confirmed that although they were not fully aware of and familiar to AA followed by the government, they were not staff developed to these mechanisms hence did not have a full comprehensive knowledge about how these gender equalities and women empowerment policies were applied in their promotion. Ms Danda responded as follows;

I do not seriously take AA and government mechanism to advance women into leadership positions and decision making. Our government has not thoroughly carried out workshops to educate us on matters of AA of women into leadership positions. Therefore, these mechanisms exist on paper.

This view was also echoed by Mrs Nhanga who commented;

I think the government through the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education is not firm on affirmative action and advancement of women to leadership of schools. It could have undertaken country wide awareness campaigns encouraging female teachers to apply for headship of schools. Surely we are told to apply just because we are females.

Perceptions of the Participants About AA

The findings showed that female teachers perceived AA as a rhetoric way to uplift women to leadership and bring about gender equality in educational leadership. Twenty female teachers (66.6%) subscribed to this perception. Below are the remarks of the participants. Senior woman Mrs. Good said;

It is a way by government to encourage female teachers to be school heads...but this encouragement is just on paper and many of us women remain unattached by this initiative

Ms Kupa added;

It is a way used by the government to show international world that our country is gender sensitive and therefore encourages women to lead schools. I however do not see that a lot of women will take heed of the initiative. It is a lip service by the government.

On the other hand, some 24 (80%) female teachers categorically stated that they were hurt by the affirmative action and therefore had negative reactions. They expressed the view that some female teachers who do not have skills to lead and are promoted on the basis of gender. Senior woman, Mrs. Guvi observed;

I think the affirmative action and accelerated advancement of women are superficial in that they do not fully consider the reasons why women remain not attracted by the initiatives.

Mrs. Matura remarked;

We are hurt by AA because promotion based on it renders us to be looked down by some female teachers and more so by male teachers. They will point fingers at us as under-achievers who rely on AA for promotion.

Similarly, Ms Matengu felt that AA harmed female posture of leadership and this subsequently made female school heads promoted on the basis of AA less respectable by the community. She remarked;

Some stakeholders and school communities are skeptical of capabilities and even qualifications of female heads promoted on the basis of AA and this hurts. Female teachers should compete with males for leadership and not to be given advantage by AA.

The hurt was also described by senior woman Mrs. Kapu who lamented over female heads being given demeaning names just because they were promoted on the basis of AA;

It is disturbing that some female heads are labelled harlots of the male District Education Inspectors or Provincial Education Officers. This is worsened by the fact that district education officers are dominated by males who are then considered to favour female teachers into leadership posts through AA.

The above views portray a negative attitudes by female teachers towards AA. The negative attitudes are attributed to negative perceptions of AA. Female teachers perceived that AA causes females to be looked down as weak, incapable and less intelligent to lead schools. The views also revealed a perception by female teachers that female teachers promoted through AA are less respected by the stakeholders who are skeptical of their professional qualifications. The perception is that AA lowers the standard and quality of leadership. Yet, some female teachers perceived AA as stigmatising them as incompetent due to the perception that their promotion was based on AA consideration instead of on merit. However, there was a different dimension mentioned by some of the potential women beneficiaries of AA. These showed a lack of passion for the post of headship because of the demands the job places on school heads. These expressed lack of interest because of the work conditions posed by headship:

“Yes AA is an opportunity that presents itself to us as women. In the district, I only know about one female school-head. Is she the only woman with potential? Do you think that women do not want to lead? Where are they? Do you think they have no leadership aspirations?”

“I observed that my school-head works 24/7 which I don’t like. I see him go to office even over the weekends. He has very little social time. I think I may not cope with such type of a career. I need my social time especially with family.”

It would appear that although knowledgeable about AA, some potential beneficiaries of AA seem to bemoan absence of women as role models. The question posed by interviewee; where are they? points to lack of role models. This empirical finding of this study seems to have been partially observed by Chitsamatanga, Rembe, and Rembe (2020) who assert that when women see other women in leadership positions, they are more likely to speak up for themselves and aspire to lead.

Conclusions

The theoretical and empirical data in this study converge on the view that women as beneficiaries of AA have negative attitudes towards it emanating from negative perceptions. Inadequate knowledge and negative perceptions among targeted female teachers to accept AA constitute stumbling block for successful implementation of this initiative whose main focus is to fight gender inequality in educational leadership. Being knowledgeable about AA does seem to improve female teacher’s attitude towards AA. Our empirical findings seem to confirm the view that positive attitudes towards female leadership are critical in making women more visible in leadership (Carli & Eagly, 2018).

Recommendations

Drawing from the conclusion of the study, the researchers propose a model of Planned Change Behaviour (PCB) that provides female teachers appropriate perceptions that intrinsically motivate them to grasp opportunities posed by AA for them. The model is entrenched in the premise that women, just like men, make logical rational decisions to engage in specific behaviour by assessing three critical information available to them. First, women evaluate their attitude towards taking behaviour towards the initiative (AA). The women’s attitudes towards AA need to be positive for them to accept change behaviour and go for leadership posts. Therefore, the government needs to educate the mind-sets of women to create positive attitudes towards AA. Second, women need to look at subjective norms by considering what others in their social environment say about AA. This is because the significant others shape women’s behaviour towards accepting leadership posts. If society in general encourages and appreciates women in leadership positions, then women will take up leadership of schools. Finally, perceived behaviour controls need to be evaluated prior to taking up a new behaviour. Women need to evaluate their competences as tools that will enable them to take leadership. Therefore, with academic skills, managerial skills and leadership skills, women should go for leadership positions. The three critical factors combine to form an intention. Intention here refers to the desire to take up leadership positions. When there is a desire but there is no corresponding behaviour to accept leadership, a gap between intention and actual behaviour to take up leadership exists. To overcome this gap potential, woman candidate then may plan the actions to take to accept leadership positions. Finally, researchers recommend that more researches be conducted to investigate the actions school organisations should take to make female teachers gain knowledge of initiatives targeted towards their advancement in leadership and to develop positive perceptions of the initiatives in other districts and provinces in Zimbabwe and beyond.

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