

Challenges and Opportunities for Women in Distance Education Management Positions: Experiences from the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU)

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ABSTRACT Concerns about women under-representation in positions of decision making, strategic planning, organizational development and their performance within distance education institutions has been the major focus of debates in higher education. The current study sought to investigate the challenges faced by women in distance education management positions, which were formerly dominated by males. The qualitative study examined and analysed the social, economic, traditional, political and religious factors influencing the degree of women advancement in Open Distance Learning (ODL) senior management positions. Data was collected through face to face interviews with one hundred and twenty staff members employed at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) using the purposive sampling technique. The major finding from the study was that women in senior management positions were affected by their multiple responsibilities which include the gendered nature of society, family influences and culture. The study recommends the holding of open and honest discussion forums on gender and equal rights issues involving both men and women and the development of family friendly culture in universities.

INTRODUCTION

The under-representation of women in senior management positions in higher institutions of learning and indeed other spheres is problematic and has become a major issue of debate in higher education circles (See for example: Nan-Chi 2006; Kiamba 2008; Bilen-Green 2008; Nazemi et al 2012; Zinyemba 2013). The cited literature further indicates that ancient systems of management under which men were assigned a monopoly of access to higher managerial positions of authority and power in organizations and the public sphere, with women restricted to the home, has come under attack in both developed and most developing countries. While efforts seem to be in place to accelerate the advancement of women, the number of women who achieve senior management positions is still disproportionate to the number of women employed in the universities. In the United States, in 2006,

women accounted for twenty three percent of college and university presidents, which was up from five percent of presidents in 1975 (Madden 2012), a token improvement of only five percent in more than 30 years! A United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural organisation (UNESCO) report cited in Ramsey (2000) found out that globally, women were grossly under-represented in higher education management with men outnumbering women at about five to one at middle management level and at about twenty to one at senior management level. Closer home in South Africa, survey data on South Africa, cited in Zinyemba (2013) showed that in 2003, the average number of women in senior management was approximately twenty four percent across seventeen institutions of higher learning and that at that point in time there were only three female Vice Chancellors, while eighty two percent of professors were male and only eighteen percent were female.

Notwithstanding the above statistics, a majority of talented and competent women in Zimbabwe and the world over have emerged from the home to occupy senior management positions in educational management. The emergence of women in higher positions of authority or into larger roles in corporate governance in higher education and distance education in par-

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ticular has provoked several debates in as far as their potential and strength in these positions are concerned. A study by Bower and Hums (2013) for example, found that some of the greatest challenges were that women were not respected, had continuous pressure to prove themselves, and were not taken seriously.

Challenges Facing Female Leadership Advancement in Higher Education

While the international community is committed to eliminating gender disparities in management positions and equally achieving gender equality by 2015 (Longwe 2001), it is currently noticed that women managing higher education institutions face serious challenges in their day-to-day operations. Mama (2005) says that, "the inequalities in senior management positions are a major infringement of rights of women despite the challenges they face in these positions". Chuma and Ncube (2010) use the concept of 'glass ceiling' to refer to the various barriers that prevent qualified women from advancing upward into management positions in their organizations. In the same vein Katuna (2014) argues that often, women can advance only so far before they hit a glass ceiling that they cannot break due to either lack of mentoring or sexist perceptions about women's ability to lead. Some of the major challenges and barriers discussed in this paper include the gendered nature of management practices, family and cultural factors and the women leadership styles.

The Gendered Nature of Management Practices

The gendered nature of management practices has led to the situation where men are regarded as more capable of dealing with certain tasks than women. Shakeshaft (1993) maintains that there is a mismatch of values and practices coupled with structural and societal barriers to women operating as managers. Meanwhile, Brock and Cammish (1997) note that there are several constraints experienced by women managers within the work situation. In most cases, there are constraints experienced through socially defined roles outside the work place, which tend to affect their operations at work. In the same vein, Bilen-Green (2008) argues that an underlying problem is that of the gendered or-

ganization, whereby work policies, interpersonal networks and embedded attitudes have evolved from the life experience of the traditional male bread-winner, creating an unequal playing field favouring the advancement of men. This widespread operation of patriarchal systems of social organizations of heavier domestic and subsistence duties of females and a generally low regard for the value of women's life, all combined, adversely affect the operations of woman managers. (Coleman 1996). Katuna (2014: 6) advises that, "By refraining from stereotypically placing women and men into fixed, socially constructed categories through our speech, interactions, and expectations, we can move in the direction of a world that is not constrained by these harmful characterizations that reproduce gender inequality."

It is also argued that women participation in positions of authority is seen to be difficult, usually thwarted by men who discourage their participation in these positions and see their activism as deviant. This 'glass ceiling' which is a metaphor for the invisible barrier that prevents women from advancing in their organizations to senior leadership positions is created by invisible forces of culture, habit, and power that serve to keep women "in their place," that is, subordinate to men (Dale 2007). Although such gender stereotypes exist however there are examples of women who have played key leadership roles in Africa and gained respect among males. In Zimbabwe, there were characters like Mbuya Nehanda (Grandmother Nehanda) who was regarded as the spirit medium of the second Chimurenga war of liberation and was highly regarded as the quintessence of the first Chimurenga of 1896 against white settlers. Also Nongquaze, a female Zulu chief, is recorded to have resisted the penetration into the Hinterland by the Boers. This does not lend credence to the argument that feminism is an alien concept that was imported into Africa and has led to an artificial dichotomy between female leaders and males veiled by ill-defined western values. On the contrary, as has been evidenced, African women leaders had vital roles in the public and private sphere.

The Effect of Culture on Women Leadership Advancement

Kaufman (2003), notes that imbalances in leadership positions are perennial problems due

to cultural values and this has been difficult to address. There is need in Zimbabwe and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region to confront stereotypical ideas, which provide fertile ground for disadvantaging women, and seek to address them with the aim of promoting the effective operations of women and men in management positions. Bargman (2005) in her research established that a major deterrent factor to women operations in leadership positions even when these are made available is a mere universal fundamental cultural bias in favour of males. It may be indeed difficult for a woman to relinquish power in the home as it is for men to assume responsibilities for domestic home activities. Ozgan (1993) observed that the main problems faced by women in management positions include isolation and marginalization. Comparing male and female support, Gourley (2013) states that men can usually rely on their wives to support them in finding the extra time entailed in holding down leadership positions while many women lack the support they need to climb the career ladder.

Despite the development of bureaucratic forms of management and an associated model of masculinity defined in terms of rational, logical and authoritative aspects of human behavior that has constructed management as a “masculinist enterprise” which makes it difficult for women to penetrate and effectively operate in these positions (Blackmore 1993), educational management is one area in which women have achieved a measure of status and authority in Zimbabwe. This has largely been through deliberate government efforts at affirmative action in favour of women. One challenge of accelerating women advancement through affirmative action policies however is that they tend to be ridiculed by their male counterparts for rising up the management ladder not because of expertise but rather because of gender. As Kiamba (2008) shows, in many institutions where women’s attainment of leadership positions has been facilitated by the implementation of employment equity policies and affirmative action there is the perception that one was ‘let in,’ and even the most capable women are viewed with suspicion. In the same vein, Bilén-Green (2008) notes that perceptions of tokenism (advancement based on social category rather than competence) diminish women leaders respect and increase pressure for women in top management positions.

Women’s historical negative evaluation from the management realm has also resulted in them developing a weak and different voice, and one which constitutes a submerged discourse. As Tsegay (2014) shows, women are typically judged to have less leadership abilities than men with similar characteristics and the same actions performed by men and women in leadership situations are evaluated more negatively when women are the leaders. According to Chuma and Ncube (2010) premised on androcentricism, women’s domestic role is perceived as antithetical to public sphere activities informed by the process of socialization which in turn “elbowed” women out of the educational, political, and macro-economic spheres. Zinyemba (2013) further notes that women are seen as soft and weak and less committed to work than men and that they are left out of the “boys clubs”. In the face of these gender prejudices women find themselves needing to work harder than their male counterparts to prove their value in management.

Family Support for Women in Leadership

The impact of the family on advancement to leadership management is widely reported in the literature. (Bilén-Green 2008; Kiamba 2008; Elmuti et al 2009; Chabaya et al. 2009; Murniati 2012; Nazemi et al. 2012; Morley 2013; Panigraphi 2013). Newman (1995) says women in management positions have problems of integrating home and work organizational lives and in matching the demands on their time. Because of failing to integrate home and work lives, some women have chosen not to marry to avoid difficulties of combining a demanding career with a family. Gauthier (2013) contends that with married life and the addition of children, women are traditionally expected to take responsibility for most household tasks and, in particular, child care and that combining these responsibilities with furthering one’s education and entering into positions of responsibility and leadership presents many demands and requires dedication. Kiamba (2008) further states that in the African context, the work and family dichotomy is filled with many contradictions for women that provoke stress while Morley (2013) notes that the moral imperative on women to care for children, the sick and elderly means that women have negative equity in the workplace. To further compound their predicament; women leaders sometimes do not get

the necessary support from their spouses. In a study by Zinyemba (2013) in Zimbabwe, the challenges to do with gender role expectations included husbands feeling jealous and insecure with wives earning more than them and enjoying company benefits such as company vehicles and entertainment allowances. Having a supportive husband as shown in a study by Murniati (2012) was vital to the career advancement of the women in that study as all the women agreed that it was very important that they obtained their husbands' approval before they accepted an administrative position.

Women Managers' Management Styles

When it comes to supervision of subordinates, women managers operate with a face-to-face personnel management style. Goodman (1992) notes that women managers tend to pay special attention to elements such as honesty, sobriety, industry, quietness, gentleness, compassion, cleanliness and neatness which are gendered and typically classified characteristics central to the smooth running of a well ordered home and also characteristics thought to be desirable for a mother. It is however noted that most women managers usually suffer a temporary discouragement as they penetrate a world where the manager is presented as "he" and where elements of effective leadership are extracted exclusively from the traits of past or present male leaders. As Elmuti et al. (2009) so cogently put it, these past perceptions of leadership skills, competence, assertiveness, aggressiveness, and task-orientation may hinder the ability of women to succeed in management. Tsegay (2014) warns that, "Recognizing women's styles of leadership represents an important approach to equity as long as they are not stereotyped as "the" ways women lead but as "other" ways of leading. The feminine leadership styles are not better or worse than the traditional male-oriented ones, they are just different."

This study on women in distance education management sought to establish the major challenges faced by women who have emerged in Open Distance Learning (ODL) senior management positions providing for development in organizational management. Research studies have highlighted that feminism is a western ideal that began as a movement for middle – class white women who felt that their role in the home

was not adequate and they operated only in the private sphere and not in the public like their husbands. This feminism is seen as failing to articulate the issues African women have and argues for a separate positioning of such issues against the backdrop of the appropriate historical context in which the traditional importance of the African women in the family and society is currently conceptualized. It is therefore against this background that the current study sought to establish the major challenges that are faced by women in management positions with specific reference to the Zimbabwe Open University, which is the sole provider of university distance education in Zimbabwe.

Objectives of the Study

The current study sought to investigate the challenges faced by women in distance education management positions with specific reference to the Zimbabwe Open University. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions;

- ♦ Why does the Zimbabwe Open University have fewer women in senior management positions than men?
- ♦ What are the factors/barriers and challenges affecting women advancement in leadership at the Zimbabwe Open University?
- ♦ What can be done to promote and support women to senior management positions in the Zimbabwe Open University?

METHODOLOGY

Using a case study approach, in the qualitative research paradigm (Yin 2003; Denzin and Lincoln 2005) the Zimbabwe Open University's ten regional centres and the national centre were used as a sample for collecting qualitative data. A qualitative study is described by Hopeful (1997) as a study, which probes for deeper understanding rather than examining surface features. Qualitative methodologies are powerful tools for enhancing our understanding of management practices and they have gained increasing acceptance in recent years and unlike quantitative researchers who seek casual determination, prediction and generalization of findings, qualitative researchers seek instead illumination, understanding and extrapolation to similar situations (Patton 2001).

Sampling Techniques

Purposeful sampling procedures were employed to select the sample for the study. Patton (2001) notes that purposeful sampling is the most appropriate and dominant strategy in qualitative research: it seeks for information rich cases, which can be observed or studied in depth. In this study, women in management were seen as information rich as they were the ones likely to be experiencing challenges. Males were however also selected to get an alternative view. As shown on Table 1, fourteen directors drawn from the ten regions and national centre were selected since they were linked to the day-to-day activities of ZOU. Regional administrators and faculty administrators were also interviewed. These were also linked to the major day-to-day administrative activities in the regions and at the national centre. Fifteen programme co-ordinators or leaders from Commerce and Law, twenty from Education and Arts, fourteen from Sciences and fourteen from Social Sciences were also interviewed. Student affairs administrators and records clerks all based at regional offices were interviewed since they were involved in the management of student affairs and records. Table 1 shows the sample for the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected from one hundred and twenty respondents drawn from the ten regional centres and the national centre, using face to face interviews with women and men occupying senior management positions in the Zimbabwe Open University. The analysis of data involved

a special set of interpretive practices and narrative techniques. The analysis and presentation involved organizing the data and breaking it into manageable units searching for common patterns and themes. The analysis of data started with the identification of main themes emerging from the raw data and recording these. Participants' quotes, which illustrate the themes being described, were recorded for presentation. Constant comparative analysis was used in the analysis of data to establish emerging themes. Findings from the interviews were presented in tables and narratives characterized by the use of quotations from respondents.

RESULTS

The Zimbabwe Open University has made notable efforts in addressing the problem of women under-representation in senior management position as shown by the number of women appointed as deans, directors, administrators, programme co-ordinators, and managers. Table 2 shows the trends in women appointments to senior management positions since the establishment of ZOU in 1994.

It was also during the period from 2005 to 2009 when a woman was appointed to the most senior position of Vice Chancellor of the university. It emerged from the data that the number of women who occupy senior management posts in the university is increasing though still grossly under represented as shown on Table 2. The Human Resources Department revealed that out of the three hundred and fifty women employed by the university only about forty-four women occupied senior management positions. The

Table 1: Distribution of the sample

<i>Region</i>	<i>Directors</i>	<i>Administrators</i>	<i>Commerce</i>	<i>Education and Arts</i>	<i>Social sciences</i>	<i>Science</i>	<i>Student affairs</i>	<i>Clerks</i>	<i>Total</i>
Bulawayo	2	1	2	3	2	2	1	2	15
Mat South	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	8
Mat North	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	9
Midlands	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	9
Masvingo	1	1	2	2	1	1	1	1	10
Manicaland	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	9
Mash West	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	8
Mash Central	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	8
Mash East	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	8
Harare	3	1	2	3	2	2	1	2	16
National Center	4	4	2	2	2	2	0	4	20
Total	17	14	15	20	14	14	10	16	120

Table 2: Women appointments to senior positions from 1994-2008

	Regional directors N=10				Dean N=4				Administrator				Programmes Co-ordinators N=80				Manager N=4			
	M		F		M		F		M		F		M		F		M		F	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1994-1997	9	90	1	10	3	75	1	25	9	90	1	10	70	88	10	12	3	75	1	25
1998-2001	9	90	1	10	2	50	1	25	8	80	2	20	66	83	14	17	3	75	1	25
2002-2005	8	80	2	20	2	50	2	50	8	80	2	20	62	77	18	23	2	50	2	50
2006-2008	8	80	2	20	1	25	3	75	7	70	3	30	58	72	22	28	1	25	3	75

Source: Respondents biographical data

university had a total staff complement of five hundred in its ten regions and the national centre. A senior clerk in one of the regions remarked that at lower levels of the organization women officers tended to have fewer challenges unlike at higher levels like the position of Manager or Director.

Senior Management Positions at ZOU

The study established that while the highest position in the university was occupied by a lady, most of the senior management positions of directors, managers and programme co-ordinators were occupied by men as shown on Table 3.

From the illustrations on the table, eighty percent of the Regional Directors were male and only twenty percent were female. This is an indication that men dominate the regional directorate. From all the ten regional centers ninety percent of the Deputy Directors were male. Equally the same with the Regional Administrators, seventy percent of them were male with thirty percent females. The same trend is also evident with Regional Faculty Co-ordinators which were dominated by male lecturers. In the Faculty of Education and Arts seventy percent were male, with thirty percent female, the Faculty of Commerce and Law had ninety percent male with ten percent females, the Faculty of Social Science had seventy percent male and twenty four percent females, the Faculty of Science had sixty six percent male and forty four percent females while the Student Affairs Department had sixty two percent males and thirty eight percent females. The general trend shows that most of the senior management positions are held by men. A female Programme Co-coordinator from one of the regions indicated that she would rather take a lower position than to take the post of Regional Director that will require her to be absent from her family on a regular basis on ZOU business.

A positive trend is observed at the national centre where the Vice Chancellor and most of the national directorate are based. The analysis of data on Table 4 established that there was a marked increase in the number of women at the national centre where seventy five percent of the Deans were women. Senior management posts at the level of departmental directors were still dominated by men, that is sixty percent male and forty percent female directors. While sev-

enty five percent of women held higher positions of dean of faculties, they claimed that they were finding their roles rather difficult, given the fact that their duties required them to work overtime. Working overtime also meant increasing their time away from their families, an issue that leads to stressful conditions.

Family Factors Affecting Women in Senior Management Positions

In all interviews carried out at the national centre, women Directors indicated that they had major problems in trying to accommodate and accomplish both home responsibilities and the requirements of the university job. One of the women Directors remarked that she would have chosen not to have a family because of the difficulties and challenges of combining a demanding university career with caring for her family. One female administrator remarked that, "I am rather haunted by leaving my young son to scream as I try to sound professional by leaving him with a maid." Women Directors at the national centre remarked that while there had been a great success and achievement in training and developing women in Zimbabwe, most of them had found it difficult to leave their homes in the morning to spend the whole day at work. One of the programme Co-ordinators noted that she was offered a job as a Deputy Dean by one of the Universities in South Africa but because of her family attachments she could not take up the job. The study established that sixty percent of the women respondents claimed that they suffered the consequences of working long and unsociable hours and the effects of this on family life was undesirable.

A male Regional Administrator in one of the regions concurred that motherhood was one of the single determinants in the failure of women to achieve organizational goals. He noted that each time women were grouped together the central basis of their discussions was their families, with very little else covered in as far as their work related issues were concerned. A woman programme co-coordinator also observed that, for most women in management positions the real tension between work and home began when their children started going to school. Sixty percent of the women interviewed noted that they would have loved to have seen their children leaving for school having made all the necessary preparations for them and also welcoming them back from school.

Cultural Factors Limiting Women's Organisational Goal Achievement

The findings revealed that in all the ten Zimbabwe Open University regions there was a fundamental culture bias in favour of males. One of the female Regional Directors noted that on several occasions people had asked her if they could see the Regional Director when in fact she was the Regional Director! Also the study established that men had a negative attitude towards women in senior management positions. Men naturally do not want to be led by women. To most men a woman cannot be the head of an organization as much as she cannot be the head of a family unless in the absence of a man. One of the women directors noted that male managers regarded female managers as not managers in the executive sense of high power decision-making but rather as concerned with culturally prescribed activities relating to working at home, such as looking after buildings and people in the home. The same administrator noted that the moment a woman occupied a senior position, she encountered problems such as loneliness, isolation, lack of acceptance, particularly as a result of rejection by peers and subordinates of both genders. One of the woman directors at the national centre noted that the first time a woman received criticism or the first time she failed, she would code it as a sign that she was inferior and that she should never have tried to become a manager in the first place.

DISCUSSION

Women Representation in Senior Management Positions at ZOU

Despite the vigorous campaign and success achieved in the training and education of women and the increased reservoir of highly and suitably qualified women in the Zimbabwe Open University, the study revealed that the number of women in senior management positions was lower than that of men. Probably the reason is that women in senior management positions are faced with several challenges which affect their day-to-day operations some which are discussed in this section. A notable major stride is the fact that the Vice Chancellor of the university is a woman. However, still the number of women in senior management is disproportionate to the

number of women employed by the university. The Human Resources Department revealed that out of the three hundred and fifty women employed by the university only about forty-four women occupied senior management positions. This is similar to the situation in Iran, where according to a study cited in Nazemi et al. (2012) although the percentage of women in the academic profession at all levels has grown in Iran in the last 30 years, research still shows that only five percent of the managerial positions are held by women faculty members in top Ten Iranian Universities. Commenting on the United States of America, Mainah (2014) notes that there are only 494 female University Presidents out of the 2,148 institutions of higher education some of who are Presidents of ivy league colleges which does not amount to much given the over 50 years they have had to fight to get there.

At the time of the study, the University had a total staff complement of approximately five hundred in its ten regions and the national centre. It appears that while a large percentage of the lower level posts of responsibility are held by women, the percentage of the more senior posts held by women is disproportionately small. This seems to agree with Dale (2007)'s observation that women's marginalization is particularly poignant in higher education, a traditionally patriarchal environment that has provided limited access for women leaders and administrators. Advancement of women into senior management positions can thus be hampered by such issues as gender stereotyping, fear of not succeeding, family responsibilities and lack of time (Maseko and Proches, 2013; Panigrahi, 2013; Ekren 2014).

From the analysis of data, it was established that only fifty-five women occupied senior management positions while the remaining one hundred and seventy five occupied lower positions in the university. A senior clerk in one of the regions remarked that at lower levels of the organization women officers tended to have fewer challenges unlike at higher levels like the position of Manager or Director. This scenario of under representation of women in senior management positions at ZOU is in line with global trends. Kiamba (2008), citing Gumbi (2006) remarks that literature on leadership in higher education generally reveals that women are less likely than men to participate in upper levels of administration and that leadership in higher education is still a man's world and universities are male dominated institutions

The study also showed that women were disproportionately represented in the regional management structures. A woman Regional Director indicated that most women were not willing to be associated with the challenges faced by Regional Directors in their day to day operations. From all the ten regional centres ninety percent of the Deputy Directors were male. The general trend shows that most of the senior management positions are held by men. This situation seems to be similar to the situation in the United states where Nan-Chi (2006) indicates that women in leadership positions are not only in the minority but also are often viewed as "outsiders." and is echoed by Bilen-Green et al (2008) who states that relatively few women advance to top academic leadership positions such as dean, provost, president or chancellor. Therefore, they are challenged with complex institutional barriers of great magnitude and profundity.

While nationally with the ten ZOU regions put together women were underrepresented in management positions, the situation was different at the national centre where the university is administered from. At the national center where the Vice Chancellors and most of the national directorate are based, as shown in the results section forty percent of the directorate was occupied by women departmental subunit Directors with seventy five percent of the Deans of faculties as women. Such positive developments in gender equity in management are also found in Sweden, where according to Peterson (2014), Sweden has the highest percentage of female university Vice Chancellors in Europe. Peterson (2014) avers that this increase in the number of women in management positions in higher education might be interpreted as an example of how women were breaking the so called 'glass ceiling' in academia. While seventy five percent of women hold higher positions of dean of faculties, most of those that were interviewed claimed that they are finding their roles rather difficult, given the fact that their duties required them to work overtime. Working overtime also meant increasing their time away from their families, an issue that led to stressful conditions. Similarly, in response to questions about the challenges of being an academic administrator and a professor, Murniati (2012) reports that a shared complaint among the women was how the heavy workload of being both an administrator and a

teacher discouraged them from pursuing higher academic positions such as deans, associate presidents, or presidents.

The Effect of the Family on Advancement to Senior Management

While it emerged from the analysis of data that some women claimed that they were comfortable in their ability to overcome social, cultural and patriarchal obstacles and barriers that were placed on their way, most women interviewed indicated that they could not take the post of Regional Director considering the mobility involved in the post and the need to constantly travel long distances to the National Centre for strategic planning meetings. Regional Directors regularly travel to the National Centre and other regions for meetings and other related issues. Because of this, women would rather take lower positions than to take the post of Regional Director that would require them to be absent from their families on a regular basis on ZOU business. With regards to the family commitments, Zinyemba (2013) reports that gender role expectations require women to take care of the home and family while the men spend most of the time away from home and as a result women who have full time employment face challenges in the balancing work and life. In a similar vein, Panigrahi (2013) reporting on Ethiopia asserts that when females obtain or seek positions as educational leaders, it is not easy to balance their work and family obligation and consequently women give priority to their family and might be less committed to jobs that require more time investments because of their combined work and family roles. In a study by Katuna (2014) some of the women respondents spoke of the convenience of delaying leadership to a time when their children were grown up. In all interviews carried out at the national centre, women Directors indicated that they had major problems in trying to accommodate and accomplish both home responsibilities and the requirements of the university job. One of the women Directors remarked that she would have chosen not to have a family because of the difficulties and challenges of combining a demanding university career with caring for her family. The family barriers are so strong that they can prevent women from being effective and also from moving up in their organizations. Writing about her

leadership ascendance, Bradley (2013: 60) states, "As the mother of four sons, I found that the decisions I made about work and family, and how to enjoy both, were critical for me.

As shown in the results section, the study established that sixty percent of the women respondents claimed that they suffered the consequences of working long and unsociable hours and the effects of this on family life was undesirable. In this regard, findings by Zinyemba (2013) on women in leadership positions in the hospitality and financial services industry in Zimbabwe show that the biggest challenge faced by women is that of work-life balance, emanating from pressure of time and the need to fulfil the multiple roles that a woman manager must fulfil as wife, mother and manager at work.

Cultural Factors Limiting Women's Leadership Advancement

While women are increasingly moving into the labour market to occupy senior management positions, in all the ten Zimbabwe Open University regions there was a fundamental culture bias in favour of males. Already shown in the results section, one of the female Regional Directors noted that on several occasions people had asked her if they could see the Regional Director when in fact she was the Regional Director! The general impression is that the position of Director should be held by a man. As Chuma and Ncube (2010) show, the persistent stereotyping that associates management with maleness contributes to the resistance of female leadership and discrimination. Bower and Hums (2013) are of the view that working hard and staying confident may help diminish the stereotype that women do not have the necessary skills to work in leadership positions.

The widespread operation of patriarchal systems of social organizations and heavier domestic duties of women all combine to adversely affect the operation of women at their work place. The influence of cultural bias of patriarchal systems can only be overcome by a profound change of attitude on the part of influential males who should consider women as potential assets for development and organizational goal achievement. Regrettably, even biological career breaks to allow for childbirth and initial care are detrimental to women's career development in the university. One of the women directors not-

ed that male managers regard female managers as not managers in the executive sense of high power decision-making but rather as concerned with culturally prescribed activities relating to working at home, such as looking after buildings and people in the home. In this regard, Katuna (2014) observes that the prevalence of traditional gender roles that exist in the domestic sphere are thus sometimes observed in various contexts, even once a leader obtains a position of exceptional authority. Similarly Chuma and Ncube (2010) report that the patriarchal nature of the majority societies militates against women to ascend organizational hierarchy as organizations are systematically organized for male supremacy and are not gender neutral. They further add that women find themselves playing second fiddle to men because the core values of patriarchy are male domination and control of the perceived weak groups, which are women.

This study also established that men had a negative attitude towards women in senior management positions. Men naturally do not want to be led by women. To most men a woman cannot be the head of an organization as much as she cannot be the head of a family unless in the absence of a man. As Bissessar (2013) shows, the problem of women being forced to adhere to strict gender roles continues to be one of the major deterrents in women's empowerment, self-esteem and feminist identity development. In this regard, in a study by Zinyemba (2013) some female leaders also indicated that they faced challenges in decision making especially in meetings when their opinions were taken in last with management team members showing preference for decisions coming from male colleagues. Findings by Makura (2009) in the primary schooling system also show that Zimbabwean male primary school teachers displayed negative attitudes through non-cooperation with the female school heads in official activities and in some cases even verbally abused the female heads. Similarly, in higher education in Zimbabwe, Miranda (2008) reports that women leaders also experience general insubordination, resentment, and hostility from their co-workers in the male-dominated workplaces in which they work. Bower and Hums (2013), after a study on women in leadership found that their feelings and thoughts revolved around the concept of this still being a man's world and that for a woman to move into a leadership position, she would need to make

personal sacrifices in relationship to her family and personal life.

Because of these negative attitudes towards women in senior management positions, most women in these positions have been made to feel unaccepted, and their confidence in nearly everything they do has been lessened as a result of the negative counter-productive attitudes of men. One of the woman directors at the national centre noted that the first time a woman received criticism or the first time she failed, she would code it as a sign that she was inferior and that she should never have tried to become a manager in the first place. This is supported by Blackmore (1993) who says women in society are less valued than men. Blackmore (1993) further argues that women from birth onwards through school into adult life, receive subtle messages about their (dubious) worth in society and because of this they have been found to have poorer self image and lower self-esteem than men. Furthermore, Chabaya et al. (2009) report that in their study low-self esteem and lack of confidence were advanced as explanations for the under-representation of women in school headship positions.

To try and compensate for the problem of cultural inferiority complex, some women managers may tend to be 'iron ladies' resorting to autocratic leadership styles, hence such women are noticed but feared more than valued in their organization, as was observed by one of the male regional administrators. Such strategies act to further isolate these women leaders. A male administrator interviewed in this study noted that the moment a woman occupies a senior position, she encounters problems such as loneliness, isolation and she lacks acceptance, particularly as a result of rejection by peers and subordinates of both genders. As Morley (2013) observes, women who resort to these autocratic styles seem to be informed by the conventional view which is that the skills, competencies and dispositions deemed essential to leadership, include assertiveness, autonomy and authority and these are embedded in socially constructed definitions of masculinity.

All in all, major challenges and barriers to women in senior management positions at the Zimbabwe Open University are seen as emanating from individual socialization, cultural biases, organizational constraints to women operations, with even other constraints emanating

from their dual responsibilities at work and at home. The problems surrounding gender inequality in senior management positions in the Zimbabwe Open University and other organizations are thus multi-faceted, warranting a holistic approach based on complex and diverse variables to get deeper in establishing the challenges women face in their management positions. While not denying the tensions and guilt associated with simultaneously managing a home and a paid job, this dual role for women has become a convenient peg for men on which to hang a range of explanations for under-achieving and ineffective organizational performance by women in leadership.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is evident that women in senior management positions at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) are faced with multiple challenges emanating from their multiple roles in the home and at the work place. What is clearly evident from this study is that women have failed to claim a fair share in the distribution of senior management positions at ZOU. The study also managed to provide an awareness of how sex-role stereotyping and discrimination of women can have a negative effect on career development and achievement at work. The study however also concludes that notwithstanding the lower overall numbers of women in management positions compared to men, the Zimbabwe Open University has made notable efforts in addressing the problem of women under-representation in senior management position as shown by the number of women appointed as deans, directors, administrators, programme co-ordinators, and managers at the national centre.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings from the study, it is recommended that consideration should be made of the importance of family friendly culture in universities to alleviate serious home/work challenges for women who would consider the additional responsibilities of management. The Zimbabwe Open University could for example establish some work-place nurseries/pre-schools in its regions where women employees would directly benefit and be secure in the knowledge

that their children are being properly looked after near them.

Efforts should be made to facilitate the reduction of many barriers to women's advancement and their day-to-day operations. The work environment for women should be made more conducive by introducing strategic plans and reward systems to promote the participation of women employees. Open discussions among both males and females on gender and stereotyping should be held to conscientize the males on issues of human rights.

Efforts should be made by responsible authorities to enforce legislation to reduce the problem of unfair discrimination and negative attitudes against women in the workplace. There is need to enforce laws which seek to protect employees against unnecessary discrimination on the grounds of sex, marital status, race, nationality or ethnic origin and disability. This should be part of an integrated and co-ordinated human resources development strategy that includes such other aspects as health and economic empowerment of women. Care should taken however to ensure that those women appointed into senior positions meet the minimum requirements for them to gain the necessary respect from their male counter parts.

Finally, it is recommended that universities at large should come out with educational programmes that encourage women and girls to take up challenging courses of study, which in turn can assist by making them ready for challenging senior positions in different organizations.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

One area of further study could be a narrative of success stories of women in leadership who have been successful to see how they have managed to break the barriers. A document analysis study on university appointment policies could also be undertaken to determine the extent to which universities embrace equity in promotions criteria among males and females. As the study was conducted at a distance learning Open University, duplicate studies could be conducted at contact universities to compare the trends. A further study could be conducted on the impact of spousal support on female leadership success.

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

As is true of any study, this study does have some limitations. Firstly the study sampled only one university and a bigger sample with more universities might have painted a different picture. Secondly, the authors are men who might also be trapped in the traditional gendered nature of society in their beliefs and this might have affected the way the study was conducted. This was however minimised through sharing the interview instruments with female researchers for input before the study was conducted.

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