Gender Differences in Managing Organisational Conflicts– The Case of Women Primary School Principals in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This paper draws from a qualitative research study done in 2004/5 in fulfilment of requirements for a doctorate project. The study focuses on the educational leadership experiences of a selected group of women school heads, (contextualised in male-dominated societal and organisational structures) in Zimbabwe. The research is critical in understanding how women primary school leaders strategise to minimise conflict in educational settings. The adoption of a qualitative methodology proved vital in terms of understanding the conflictual dilemmas in educational environments and how they were resolved. Continuous dialogue and interaction emerged as a strategy of identifying gaps and challenges in schools and as a way of negotiating and mobilising resources; transforming the school community and in the process, creating a peaceful and conducive learning atmosphere. This study generated in me an interest in developing an understanding of peace in more detail.

Introduction

"Historically, men have dominated the field of leadership and management positions in education" (Enomoto 2000:375). In addition, public power has been a male preserve and mostly out of reach of women. The women's entry into positions of authority is therefore, perceived as a change of culture and this development created tensions among organisational members and uncertainty within the communities as revealed by my study. The participants in my research study were the first group of women to be promoted to headship positions in primary schools in post-colonial Zimbabwe as a result of the promulgation of the PSC circular number 4 of 1991 on the advancement of women in the Public Service. Mostly men because of the conflicting and entrenched patriarchal values strongly resisted the promotion of women in order to redress gender imbalances in the Public Service.

The aim of this paper is to examine the sources of conflict the women primary school heads experienced and how they strategise to minimise those challenges in educational settings. Different management styles are examined from a gender perspective, which is also culturally linked. The first section discusses organisational culture and its impact on gender and organisational conflict in educational institutions. The second section focuses on how women managed and in some instances resolved organisational conflict through the reshaping of organisational culture, with creativity and learning as sub-headings. Furthermore gender differences in terms of managing organisational conflicts are examined in the third section in relation to interactive leadership, motherly care and the involvement of the community in school activities. The last section discusses how qualitative methodology contributes to an understanding of gendered approaches to management of organisational conflicts. Finally is the concluding section.

The paper is based on a qualitative study involving five women primary school heads in Zimbabwe. Qualitative research is said to be a powerful tool for learning more about our lives and socio-historical contexts in which we live. The five women in my study had long standing stories, which had not been documented, and it is only through qualitative research from a phenomenological approach that those stories could be adequately unveiled. This paper seeks to understand in-depth the women educational leaders' experiences of their world and the world around them, and how they responded to the challenges and their interpretation of conflict situations as well as the strategies they adopt to manage and in some instances resolve conflicts.

Five women primary school heads were selected using snowball as a chief sampling technique. The first woman was identified using purposive sampling basing on experience, fluency and willingness; thus a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used and that produced a well balanced sample of educational school heads. A snowball sampling technique according to Patton (2002:237) is an approach for locating "information-rich key informants", that is those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of inquiry. In order to proceed into the field of research I had to get permission from the Ministry of Education as Neuman (1997) suggested that a researcher should seek clearance to conduct research from competent authorities. I still had to get the agreement of women heads to participate in the study. The use of pseudonyms such as Shelly, Enita, Linda, Lonkina and Ivy was implemented throughout the study to ensure that confidentiality and anonymity was

maintained. In order to situate the paper I begin by examining sources of conflict within the school context focusing on organisational culture.

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE AND ORGANISATIONAL CONFLICT

Culture is produced through everyday interactions, be it organisational culture or society at large, it is the way people do things. According to Handy (1988:116) culture is the "total of the inherited ideas, beliefs, values and knowledge which constitute the shared bases of social action". From this definition it should be clear that when someone' action is a response to cultural values, the behaviour of that particular individual or group reflects the beliefs and values of the inherited culture they become part of it. Rutherford (2001:372) acknowledged that "people form great attachments to their cultures", which explains why they behave in certain ways, or in the case of women in my particular study, there has been resistance to change and perhaps why the women educational leaders received resentment initially as deputy heads. The post independence pioneering women school heads got stiff resistance to their leadership from both the community and within the schools where they were located. They had no peace during their early days as female primary deputy school heads because of the conflicting values and perceptions as far as women's leadership was concerned. People especially, men were used to seeing male leadership as the norm and the communities as well, hence their reluctance to easily accept women as leaders. Something inherited must be difficult to let go as has happened in the case of women in my study and in addition, different people or groups believe in and value different things. Similarly cultures also differ from one school to another as well as from one organisation to another.

Organisational culture according to Rutherford (2001:373) refers to the "symbols, beliefs and patterns of behaviour of organisational members". To be more specific, for instance in leadership, culture is expressed in the form of work philosophies, language and communication and management style and these differ from one organisation to another thereby generating potentially conflicting situations. In Muddock's (1999:192) analysis of gender and culture in the public sector, it has been revealed that male cultures though they vary from one organisation to another, their common theme is that, "men continue to underrate and undervalue women in general". The implications of gendered nuances within the school settings and people's perceptions of female leadership create conflict among members, the community and society as a whole. At societal level, for instance, the patriarchal exclusionary practices, assume women to be basically home

based. In a way such an approach has marginalized and excluded women from other areas of employment and positions of authority. The problem arises when changes are effected in an attempt to try to redress gender imbalances in terms of school leadership. In this regard, Maddock (1999) and Wacjman (1998) emphasised the need to examine the cultural obstacles and conflicts women face in organisations. Generally women experience social devaluation and marginalisation. Strategies to minimise organisational conflicts in the school contexts are needed if one is to pave way for the creation of peaceful environments.

Within organisations conflict arise not only due to conflicting values as elaborated by Soobrayan (1998:35) who observed that in recruiting, "a popular question that endure in interview panels is whether an aspiring woman candidate for the post of head-teacher is tough enough to discipline unruly boys". In this case men are perceived as the ones suitable for disciplining boys, and are believed or expected to be tough enough. This reflects society's thinking and its belief about management styles of both men and women. It is these and other related assumptions that create conflict when what is perceived as the norm is overridden or violated. From Soobrayan's (1998) observation toughness is associated with males and the ability to enforce discipline. Yet findings from other studies show that there is a gender difference in managing schools and organisations and also in resolving organisational conflicts. It could be argued though that management style is part of organisational culture, although there are variations in school cultures as shall be highlighted in the next section.

Variation in school cultures

Variations in school culture can be related to historical and political contexts, for instance in Zimbabwe, prior to independence in 1980, colonial ideology structured school culture and climate along racial lines. More resources were given to white schools where the teacher pupil ratio was quite low (1 to 20) as compared to schools for the blacks where the teacher pupil ratio was 1 to 40, with unqualified teachers. At independence in 1980, the Zimbabwean government established an open education system that allows every child irrespective of race to be in school for at least up to O-level (Mlahleki 1995). However, glaring differences in school cultures still exist between rural and urban schools, day and boarding schools in terms of resources and parental involvement. Children from middle class backgrounds access more expensive schools characterised by better learning facilities, material resources, qualified competent teachers and an ethos that emphasises both academic

success and a positive school climate (Mlahleki 1995). While political, historical and socio-economic factors have had a strong influence on the various school cultures in Zimbabwe, women also had a significant impact on schools at national level with their participation in management of primary schools as reveal by my study. As indicated before, differences in leadership approach and communication patterns contribute to variations in school culture and in line with Sergiovani's (1987:116) thinking; "leadership reality for all groups is the reality they create for themselves". In a similar vein women educational leaders create their own leadership reality and struggle to reshape the cultures of their schools through creativity and learning, interactive leadership, provision of a motherly care and involving the community in school activities. This approach reflects a gender difference in resolving organisational conflicts as the dilemmas for instance infused by conflicting values and other challenges in schools within the Zimbabwean context are settled mostly through dialogue and creativity.

MANAGING CONFLICTS IN SCHOOL SETTINGS IN ZIMBABWE

Women educational leaders in Zimbabwe experienced work environments in which they felt less welcome and threatened by what they perceived as "self-serving domineering cultures" (Applebaum, Audet and Miller 2003:47). Strategies such as creativity and learning, interactive leadership, provision of a motherly care, and involving the community in school activities opened up opportunities for conducive atmosphere and peaceful environments. These strategies became part of their management style and a way of reshaping people's thinking about leadership and about women taking leadership positions in schools. It is the way women leaders communicated that reflects creativity.

Creativity

When one of the women encountered resistance, Ivy for instance, who was promoted and transferred to assume headship position at a school with a male acting as a head, was denied access to the office, her approach was non confrontational. Ivy instead of using power or authority for the acting head to vacate the office, she was quite creative as she designed a strategy that could be seen as less hierarchical and less authoritative. She moved around, "passing on good comments" on whatever work done by the acting head and sharing information on how he did some of his work. This approach seemed to have boosted the acting head's self esteem, and enhanced the acting head's perception of himself. Ivy believed that the man felt encouraged and

honoured as he finally relocated himself, without anyone's command or order (authority). By exercising this type of communication and management style, the women create a positive and peaceful atmosphere and in the process people's thinking about women getting into educational leadership position is re-shaped. The women's creative strategies in minimising challenges are reflected in yet another incident where Enita, one of the participants managed to create a conducive atmosphere for the children at a boarding school where most of the pupils were bullies. Instead of enforcing tough rules for disciplining the children, she introduced mechanisms that created a homely environment through sporting activities. She designed a way of keeping them busy and developed in them a sense of ownership. By designing family-like groups in which members were allocated duties they were somehow being trained to be responsible. They learnt far much more by doing.

Learning: Gender differences in managing organisational conflicts can be observed from the way women handled challenges. Accepting criticism is part of learning, this is a position taken by one of the women participants. By taking this position for instance Linda, believed she was leading by example. The women's ways of leading are associated with transformational leadership in that they believed: "everyone is an expert at something and a everyone is a learner and a leader" (Barth, cited in Diron 1994:6). This can also be perceived as re-shaping the culture of a school from toughness and dominance to tenderness and caring, sharing ideas. However, the women's descriptions of their management style tended to reflect a gender difference as they both could have used authority – punishments, charges and other forms of implementing rules and regulations but in most cases avoided that. Irby *et al.* (2002:307) observed that "female styles tend to be judged as deficient", yet other studies considered that what is perceived as deficient has tended to be the strengths for others since goals have been achieved using those approaches.

The uniqueness of the women's management style as shown in this study is their consideration of authority, described by the women as being less authoritative and applying meaningful and positive interactions. My next focus is on communication patterns used by women that have emerged as interactive-a strategy for minimising organisational conflict.

Interactive leadership
Interactive leadership means that there is a two-way communication. The women perceived themselves as interactive leaders. This suggests open

channels of communication with subordinates, teachers, pupils and their environment. Women leaders tended to interact with their environments in an effort to improve the school situation. Their leadership was not in isolation with their communities. For instance, Shelly , who was promoted to a school which she found at a standstill. While the parents initially were not supporting the school, Shelly dialogued with all the stakeholders until her interactions involved everyone surrounding the school community, including the parents. Initially as the study reflected, it was financial problem that affected both the parents and the school. The school had stopped functioning because parents could not afford to pay fees and levies. Instead of coming into conflict with parents chasing away the pupils, the women minimised conflict by creating mechanisms for fees to be paid in a peaceful manner. Through dialogue, Shelly managed to talk to the farmers-the parents' employers on behalf of the parents so that their children's fees be paid for by the farmers and then account for those bills to the parents' monthly salaries. The women's management style minimised what could have been big challenges to something manageable. The women encouraged both parents and the community to participate in school activities and school developments without the use of formal authority. In a similar incident Enita interacted with both the school members and the parents in handling the pupils discipline problem. In Rosener's (1990:120) study of women managers, interactive leadership meant women who "actively work to make their interactions with subordinates positive for everyone involved".

Women leaders in this study engaged themselves in participatory styles of leadership. They perceived their staff and communities as having developed new feelings about themselves towards supporting their schools. The women experienced that through participation people become involved and in most cases, committed to their work. Several authors (Helgesen 1990; Hurty 1995; Rosener 1990) acknowledge the importance of interactive leadership.

Interactive leadership is reciprocal, that is, it involves two-way communication: talking with and listening to other people. According to Hurty (1995:102), reciprocal talk implies "turn-talking, both answering and asking questions, listening and responding to what is said". Shelly committed herself to a process of discussions that required her to revisit the same people more than once, clarifying her goals to both parents and farmers. She highlighted the fact that she tried to be transparent. She believed that in leadership, transparency is important in that it breeds mutual trust. Rosener (1990:123) found that when subordinates' ideas are respected it enhances

the information flow and "increases the odds" that leaders will hear about a "problem" before it "explodes". In the case of this study, Shelly respected the parents by listening and responding to their concerns about the fees. She facilitated the information flow when she approached the farmers on behalf of parents. The result was positive because she was open to discuss with her community – her leadership was transparent. Rowling (2003) acknowledged that setting a good example at work meant being prepared to make sacrifices in pursuit of the goals one talks about. Ivy was also open to talking both formally and informally with her subordinates. Through that she was able to articulate the problem of accommodation before teachers started leaving her school to look for schools with better accommodation. This involves a caring spirit, the theme that follows.

Motherly Care

How women leaders perceive themselves, and the way they manage reflects a mother's care since its more than just nurturing growth. The women seem to be good listeners as they tend to listen to other people's social problems in a motherly way. One of the participants, Linda, had a feeling that by trying not to ignore the teachers' problems, by giving them emotional support, she was responding to her subordinates' needs in a motherly way. The women's style of management which is more than just nurturing growth, is rooted in their socialisation of having that motherly love and caring (Rosener 1990). The management style adopted by women has been identified by a number of feminist writers who challenged the society for failure to recognise the mother as the first leader of her child (Hurty 1995; Shakeshaft 1999; Okin 1989). It should not be surprising that the women heads draw their strengths from a mother concept since

> *"the mother is the first co-ordinator, legislator and administrator and executive. From the guadian and guidance of her cubs and kittens up to the longer larger management of human youth, she is the first to consider group interests and correlate them"… (Gilman cited in Hurty 1995:399).*

Gender difference in managing of organisations has its roots in the socio-historical events. The mainstream leadership thinking is different from how the women manage, since early organisational thinking was strongly influenced by classical management theory composed of bureaucratic expectations-formal demands and obligations set by the organisation and are the key building blocks.

From the women's perceptions motherly care provides a form of security to a child that is through the mother's love security is guaranted. For instance the women in Gilman's study perceived "aggression as the fracture of human connection, while the activities of care are those, which make the social world a safer community" (cited in Hurty 1995:396). Human connection in this case can be taken to mean that the relations between people who are strained by aggression.

In trying to make sense of Gilman's findings and Enita's situation discussed earlier, a question might arise, does this mean that a mother's love is a cure or that it assures security? A reflection on Enita's scenario again might draw us closer to a better understanding of Enita's lived experience. When Enita became a leader, she happened to be at a boarding school where children were from different backgrounds and had diverse characters, and from Enita's description: "most of these kids were bullies". Enita's description of how she dealt with the children's discipline was 'love, children need love, that motherly love, they need it and I had to provide". In her case, as a boarding pupil, when she was running back home to her parent's, maybe she missed that love. When she became a school head, she encouraged teachers to talk to the children more often, so that they can have that feeling of closeness, of love and connectedness. The vocabulary of connectedness is that which Hurty (1995:395) refers to as "the importance of relationships and the web of human interactions" and this kind of connectedness is evident in the women's management style and of their lived experience as educational leaders. Enita believed in letting the pupils have a "sense of belonging". She perceived herself as having managed to, what I may call restore peace within the school environment which had become violent, because of the children's behaviour. This experience may be linked to activities of care, with some elements of producing a safe environment as reflected in Enita's description, and a cure for the behaviour of bullies. This suggests that motherly care gives children a sense of security. Her provision of love might have nurtured the children's growth so that they become responsible pupils who no longer fought others. Drake and Owen (1998:1) indicated that women, traditionally, were seen as: "main nurturers of the young" and from this role follows their "natural involvement with education". What is unique with Enita's approach is that she perceived problems as part of growing up and as a leader she felt she nurtured that growth.

How the women strategised to minimise and or resolve organisational conflict can be linked to Gilman's 1911:183) consideration of a woman as a

mother, being "the first co-ordinator, legislator, administrator and executive" (cited in Hurty 1995:399). Gilman considers the mother as a guardian, guiding her children and extending that to management of youth. Gilman believes that the woman is the first to "consider group interests and correlate them". This suggests that Gilman gives credit to the role of a woman as a mother and extends that role of the educative aspects of motherhood to educational leadership. Gilman's thinking fits well with what is reflected in the women's approach to leadership. Enita treated the children with respect and dignity. Instead of punishing, she felt that children must be missing something (thinking like a mother) and she provided them with love and it worked well. She was sensitive to their needs as reflected in her creation of houses to make sure every child received attention from the "family members" (the group and the teachers responsible). She nurtured their growth. By giving teachers responsibility for specific groups of children, Enita felt it was a way of involving everyone in the actual process of solving the problem, to participate. Teachers "owned" the groups, and they must have developed a sense of ownership, while the pupils had a sense of belonging. Rosener (1990) highlighted the importance of participation and the notion of subordinates feeling important when they feel their views are being respected. Through the described process both pupils and the teachers must have been empowered because it meant being closely connected to the pupils and to the head of the school. The women involved both the parents and the school community in school activities for the proper functioning of the school.

Involving Community

The women educational leaders worked tirelessly, encouraging parent participation in the school's activities. This can be illustrated using the case of Shelly, who communicated with parents who could not afford to pay fees for their children. The process Shelly was involved in reflects the likelihood of Hurty's (1995:389) idea that the establishment of "trust" involves talking with people in informal ways, being available to people, being willing to talk things over, give advice if requested to, and "honour confidentiality". Trust contributes to "a positive working environment" characterised by "honest", and "supportive relationships" (Moye and Henkin 2005:260).

The women's emphasis was on maintaining good working relationships with their community. Hornby (1980:248) found that when the community is involved in school programmes through collaboration, "parents are able to contribute more than just information". Hornby's observation resonates with

Ivy's case, when she wanted to improve the teachers' accommodation and discovered that funds were not enough. Ivy talked to parents and from her description, they were able to raise a certain amount towards building. Some parents volunteered to mould bricks, others to build the toilets.

The women's description of how the money was raised and the language of volunteering ties up with Bass's (1985) description of a transformational leader who motivates followers to perform beyond their expectations. Geijsel, Sleegers, Leithwood and Jantitz (2003:234) take the issue of transformational leadership further, suggesting that it stimulates the "extra effort" often needed to bring about "significant organisational change" and minimise conflict in schools.

While this paper is not about change, school improvement or school effectiveness, it is difficult to talk about women and how they managed organisational conflicts without mention of these concepts, particularly in the case of the difference in management of schools between men and women. Although literature shows that the definition of leadership is "arbitrary and very subjective" (Yukl 2004:4-5), from the women's descriptions of their accounts, it is about influencing others to bring about change for the better.

My point can best be understood in light of the context in which the women discussed in are situated. Soon after independence in Zimbabwe, the expansion of education created shortages in staff accommodation, classrooms, school furniture and all kinds of resources, including human resources. Chikomba (1988:25) acknowledged that: "many new schools have had to operate under trees and/or under the 'blazing sun' (which was termed *hot sitting*).

To improve the situation, the women suggested that they had to involve the community and work together for the better functioning of the school. In a similar vein, Hornby (1990) observed that parental involvement in schools has been the focus of attention in the 1980s for several reasons. Women school heads discussed in this paper described situations in which they involved their communities in either building more classrooms, staff accommodation, toilets, or buying school equipment such as furniture. Participants who managed to achieve one of the above, perceived themselves as having succeeded, improved the school, and/or transformed the community through the different approaches they used to encourage parents' participation. Although not possible with every school, Dimmock's

(2003:7) thinking that leadership is seen as an "empowering process enabling others …" can be linked to the women in this study.

The concept of involving pupils, parents and the community facilitates a sense of ownership. Women school heads seemed to have recognised that a school is "a world in which people live and work" (Owens: 2001:xvii). They believed in creating a good environment with an atmosphere conducive to learning. The women's approach seems to fit well with one of Kretner's (1983) identified benefits of shared decision, that if people are involved they will have an understanding of the purpose behind, and that after the final decision they will feel included. This also has been seen as a form of power sharing and a way of reducing conflict (Rosener 1990).

QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY AND ORGANISATIONAL CONFLICTS

Qualitative research is a powerful tool for investigating and understanding people's lives. In trying to get a fuller understanding of the lived experiences of women, and how they managed conflict in organisational contexts, the use of a phenomenological approach was applied. According to Merriam (2002:7) phenomenology "underpins all qualitative research". Phenomenology presents an essentially totally different ontology of organisations. Much of the feminist critique of leadership research centres on the researchers' limited ontological presentation of organisation quasi-positivistic and behavioural epistemology. Phenomenology views organisations not at structures but as complex inter-relationships among people and their environments. Our concepts of organisations must therefore rest upon the views of people in particular time and place in order to understand the world as lived and more so the management style. Reality – from a phenomenological view can be understood through interpretations of the subjective meanings, which individuals place upon their actions-that is their management style.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the sources of conflicts the women school heads experienced and how they strategised to minimise those challenges in organisational settings. From the discussion, it has shown that the women's use of interactive style of management has its roots in socialisation. Gender difference in management style has been revealed and the fact that "most women lacked formal authority over others and control over resources as

discussed, means that by default they have had to find other ways to accomplish their goals.

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