

WOMEN IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN ZIMBABWE: LEGAL, POLICY, AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS FOR GENDER EQUITY AND EDUCATIONAL GOVERNANCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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The underrepresentation of women in educational leadership remains a significant challenge despite global, regional, and national commitments to gender equality. In Zimbabwe, women constitute a substantial proportion of the teaching workforce; however, their representation in senior leadership positions remains disproportionately low. This study examined the legal, policy, and institutional factors influencing women's participation in educational leadership and explored transformative practices that can promote gender equity in educational governance. Guided by Feminist Theory, the study adopted a qualitative case study design involving 25 participants comprising female school heads, deputy heads, senior teachers, and district education officers. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis of constitutional, educational, and gender policy frameworks. Findings revealed that gender stereotypes, patriarchal institutional cultures, opaque promotion systems, inadequate mentorship opportunities, and weak policy implementation continue to hinder women's advancement into leadership positions. Conversely, leadership development programmes, mentorship initiatives, professional networking opportunities, and gender-responsive governance reforms emerged as critical enablers of leadership progression. The study argued that legal and policy commitments alone are insufficient to achieve gender equity unless accompanied by effective implementation mechanisms, institutional accountability, and governance reforms. The paper contributes to scholarship on law and education by demonstrating how educational governance structures can be transformed to promote inclusive leadership and social justice within Zimbabwe's education sector.

Keywords: Women in Educational Leadership, Gender Equity, Educational Governance, Education Policy, Institutional Reform, Women's Rights, Leadership Development, Anti-Discrimination, Educational Administration, Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

Educational leadership plays a critical role in shaping institutional effectiveness, educational quality, policy implementation, and organizational culture. School leaders influence curriculum delivery, teacher development, learner achievement, resource allocation, and institutional accountability. Consequently, leadership representation is increasingly recognized as an important governance issue rather than merely an administrative concern (Bush, 2020).

Globally, women's participation in educational leadership has improved over recent decades. Nevertheless, significant disparities persist between women's representation within the teaching profession and their representation in leadership positions (UNESCO, 2023). Although women comprise a substantial proportion of teachers worldwide, they remain underrepresented in decision-making roles such as school principals, district education officers, and senior educational administrators (UNESCO, 2023).

The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions extends beyond questions of workplace equality. It is increasingly viewed as a matter of human rights, educational governance, institutional accountability, and social justice (Morley, 2013). Educational institutions are expected to embody principles of inclusion, equity, and democratic participation. Therefore, persistent gender imbalances in leadership challenge the realization of these principles and undermine efforts to create representative governance systems.

International legal frameworks have consistently emphasized women's right to participate fully in leadership and decision-making processes. Instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the African Union Agenda 2063 advocate for increased representation of women in governance structures (United Nations, 2015).

Zimbabwe has demonstrated commitment to these principles through constitutional reforms and policy initiatives. The Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act of 2013 guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender. Similarly, the National Gender Policy seeks to increase women's participation in leadership and governance across all sectors, including education (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013).

Despite these commitments, women remain underrepresented in educational leadership positions. This situation suggests the existence of institutional, cultural, and structural barriers that continue to impede women's advancement into leadership roles. Consequently, there is a need to examine how legal frameworks, policy environments, and governance structures influence women's leadership trajectories within Zimbabwean educational institutions.

2. Background of the Study

The pursuit of gender equality has become one of the defining policy priorities of the twenty-first century. Governments, international organizations, and civil society actors increasingly recognize that equitable participation in leadership contributes to institutional effectiveness, democratic governance, and sustainable development (World Bank, 2022).

Historically, educational leadership has been dominated by men despite women's substantial presence in teaching professions. During much of the twentieth century, leadership positions within schools and educational bureaucracies were largely reserved for men, reflecting broader societal norms regarding authority and governance (Shakeshaft, 2011). Although women's participation in education has increased significantly, leadership opportunities have not expanded at the same rate.

International policy frameworks have sought to address these disparities. CEDAW (1979) obliges states to eliminate discrimination against women and promote equal participation in public life. The Beijing Platform for Action (1995) identifies women's participation in decision-making as a critical area for action. More recently, SDG 5 advocates gender equality and women's empowerment, while SDG 4 emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education (United Nations, 2015).

Within Africa, Agenda 2063 and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development similarly promote women's participation in governance and leadership. These frameworks have encouraged governments to adopt constitutional provisions and policy measures aimed at improving gender representation.

Zimbabwe has established several legal and policy instruments promoting gender equality. The Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) explicitly guarantees equality and non-discrimination. The National Gender Policy seeks to address gender disparities in leadership and decision-making. Educational policies increasingly emphasize inclusive governance and equitable participation.

Despite these legal commitments, evidence suggests that women remain underrepresented in senior educational leadership positions. While women constitute a significant proportion of teachers, particularly in primary schools, leadership positions continue to be disproportionately occupied by men. This disparity raises concerns regarding policy implementation, institutional accountability, and educational governance.

3. Statement of the Problem

Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, national gender policies, and international commitments promoting women's empowerment, women continue to be underrepresented in educational leadership positions in Zimbabwe. This underrepresentation persists even though women constitute a substantial proportion of the teaching workforce.

The persistence of gender disparities suggests the existence of structural, institutional, and cultural barriers that undermine women's progression into leadership positions. These barriers may include gender stereotypes, discriminatory organizational practices, limited access to professional networks, inadequate mentorship opportunities, and weak implementation of gender-responsive policies.

The gap between formal commitments to equality and actual representation raises important questions regarding institutional accountability, governance effectiveness, and social justice. Without deliberate interventions to address these inequalities, educational institutions risk perpetuating exclusionary leadership structures that limit diversity and representative decision-making.

Therefore, there is a need to investigate the barriers, opportunities, and transformative practices influencing women's advancement into educational leadership positions and to examine how legal, policy, and institutional frameworks shape leadership outcomes in Zimbabwe.

4. Research Objectives

The study sought to:

1. Identify barriers affecting women's advancement into educational leadership positions in Zimbabwe.
2. Examine opportunities that support women's leadership development.
3. Investigate transformative practices that promote gender-inclusive educational leadership.
4. Examine how legal, policy, and institutional frameworks influence women's access to educational leadership positions.

5. Research Questions

1. What barriers limit women's advancement into educational leadership positions?
2. What opportunities support women's progression into educational leadership?
3. What transformative practices promote women's leadership development?
4. How do legal, policy, and institutional frameworks influence women's advancement into educational leadership positions?

6. Literature Review

6.1 Gender Equity and Educational Governance

Educational governance refers to the structures, policies, processes, and institutional arrangements through which educational systems are managed and held accountable (Bush, 2020). Effective governance requires inclusive participation, transparency, accountability, and equitable representation. Increasingly, scholars argue that gender equity constitutes an essential dimension of good educational governance (Blackmore, 2013).

Research demonstrates that diverse leadership teams contribute to improved decision-making, innovation, and institutional effectiveness (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Women's participation in leadership broadens perspectives within governance structures and enhances responsiveness to the needs of diverse stakeholders. Consequently, the exclusion of women from leadership positions undermines principles of democratic participation and representative governance.

6.2 International Legal and Policy Frameworks Supporting Women's Leadership

The international community has developed numerous legal and policy instruments promoting gender equality and women's participation in leadership.

CEDAW requires member states to eliminate discrimination against women and ensure equal opportunities in public life (United Nations, 1979). Article 7 specifically emphasizes women's right to participate in policy formulation and decision-making processes.

The Beijing Platform for Action (1995) identifies women's participation in power and decision-making as a critical area requiring intervention. Governments are encouraged to establish mechanisms that increase women's representation in leadership positions.

The Sustainable Development Goals further reinforce these commitments. SDG 5 seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, while SDG 4 promotes inclusive and equitable quality education (United Nations, 2015).

These frameworks provide important normative foundations for promoting gender-responsive educational governance and leadership representation.

6.3 Global Perspectives on Women in Educational Leadership

Despite significant progress in women's educational attainment globally, leadership positions within educational institutions continue to be disproportionately occupied by men. Research across Europe, North America, Asia, and Australia indicates that women frequently encounter systemic barriers that hinder advancement into leadership roles (Coleman, 2012; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011).

In many countries, women constitute the majority of the teaching workforce but remain underrepresented among school principals, superintendents, university administrators, and policymakers. UNESCO (2023) reports that while women account for nearly two-thirds of primary school teachers globally, they occupy a much smaller proportion of senior leadership positions. This phenomenon has often been described as the "leadership gap" or "glass ceiling," whereby women experience invisible barriers to advancement despite possessing the necessary qualifications and experience (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Research in the United States and the United Kingdom suggests that leadership stereotypes continue to influence recruitment and promotion decisions. Leadership is often associated with traditionally masculine traits such as assertiveness, authority, and decisiveness, while women are expected to demonstrate nurturing and collaborative behaviors (Blackmore, 2013). These stereotypes create a double bind in which women leaders may be criticized either for being too assertive or for not being assertive enough.

Global scholarship also highlights the importance of mentorship, networking opportunities, and leadership development programs in supporting women's career advancement (Coleman, 2012). Organizations that intentionally cultivate inclusive leadership cultures tend to achieve greater gender representation in decision-making structures.

Importantly, international experiences demonstrate that legal equality alone is insufficient to guarantee equitable representation. Effective implementation mechanisms, institutional accountability, and cultural transformation are necessary to translate policy commitments into meaningful leadership outcomes (Morley, 2013).

6.4 African and Southern African Perspectives

The advancement of women into educational leadership positions remains a significant challenge across Africa despite extensive policy commitments to gender equality. Research conducted in South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, Kenya, and Zimbabwe indicates that women continue to encounter barriers associated with patriarchal norms, institutional discrimination, and limited access to leadership opportunities (Chabaya et al., 2009).

In South Africa, post-apartheid educational reforms have promoted gender equality and representative governance. However, studies indicate that women remain underrepresented in school leadership positions, particularly in rural and historically disadvantaged communities (Moorosi, 2010). Similar trends have been reported in Botswana and Namibia, where cultural expectations regarding women's domestic responsibilities continue to influence leadership trajectories.

Within Southern Africa, the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development encourages member states to increase women's participation in leadership and decision-making structures. Despite these commitments, implementation challenges remain widespread. Scholars argue that deeply entrenched patriarchal norms continue to shape perceptions of leadership and authority across many educational institutions (Moorosi, 2015).

In Zimbabwe, women have made substantial gains in educational participation and professional employment. Nevertheless, leadership positions within schools, district offices, and educational administration remain predominantly occupied by men. Chabaya et al. (2009) found that female educators frequently encounter obstacles related to gender stereotypes, limited mentorship opportunities, and family responsibilities. These challenges are often compounded by organizational cultures that favour traditional leadership models associated with masculinity.

The persistence of these barriers highlights the need for policy interventions that move beyond formal equality toward

substantive transformation of educational governance systems.

6.5 Barriers to Women's Leadership

Gender Stereotypes and Patriarchal Norms

Gender stereotypes remain one of the most significant barriers to women's leadership advancement. Traditional beliefs frequently associate leadership with masculinity while positioning women primarily as caregivers and supporters (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Within educational institutions, these stereotypes may influence recruitment decisions, promotion practices, and perceptions of leadership competence. Women leaders often face heightened scrutiny and are expected to meet higher performance standards than their male counterparts.

Institutional and Organizational Barriers

Institutional practices may unintentionally perpetuate gender inequalities. Promotion systems that rely heavily on informal networks, subjective evaluations, or opaque selection procedures may disadvantage women (Morley, 2013).

Organizational cultures can also reinforce exclusionary practices. Male-dominated leadership structures frequently create environments where women have limited access to decision-making networks and professional development opportunities.

Work-Life Balance Challenges

Research consistently demonstrates that women continue to bear disproportionate responsibility for caregiving and domestic work (UN Women, 2022). Leadership positions often require extensive time commitments, travel, and administrative responsibilities that may conflict with family obligations.

Consequently, many women experience difficulties balancing professional advancement with societal expectations regarding caregiving responsibilities.

Limited Mentorship and Professional Networks

Mentorship plays a critical role in leadership development. However, women frequently report limited access to mentors, sponsors, and professional networks that facilitate career progression (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011).

The absence of mentorship opportunities reduces access to leadership knowledge, professional guidance, and advancement opportunities.

6.6 Opportunities and Transformative Practices

While barriers persist, various interventions have demonstrated potential for promoting women's leadership advancement.

Leadership Development Programmes

Leadership training initiatives provide women with opportunities to develop managerial competencies, strategic planning skills, and organizational leadership capabilities (Bush, 2020).

Mentorship and Coaching

Formal mentorship programmes connect aspiring leaders with experienced professionals who provide guidance, support, and career advice. Such programmes have been shown to increase confidence, leadership readiness, and career progression (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Professional Networks

Professional associations and networking opportunities enable women to access information, share experiences, and build collaborative relationships that support career advancement.

Gender-Responsive Policy Reforms

Educational institutions can promote equity through transparent recruitment procedures, gender-sensitive promotion criteria, accountability mechanisms, and regular gender audits. These reforms help address structural inequalities and promote inclusive governance.

7. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Feminist Theory, which provides a framework for understanding how social structures, institutional arrangements, and power relations contribute to gender inequalities (Acker, 2012).

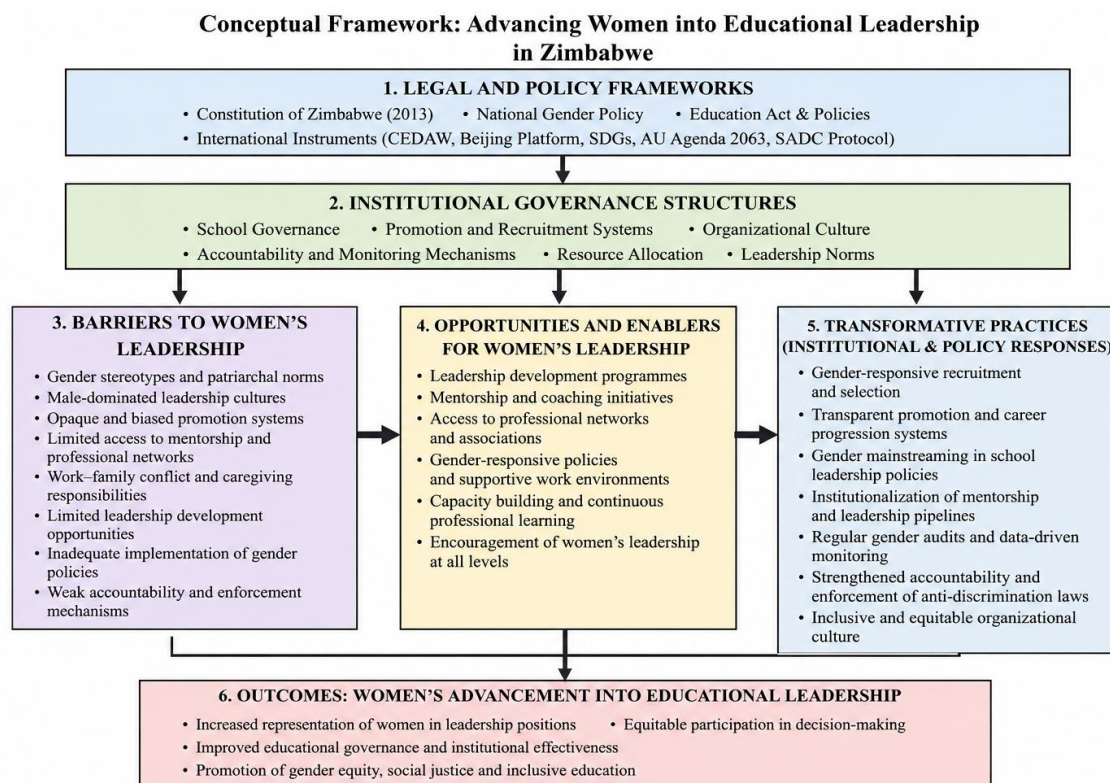
Feminist Theory argues that organizations are not gender-neutral spaces. Rather, they reflect historical patterns of power and privilege that frequently advantage men while marginalizing women. Leadership structures, promotion systems, and organizational cultures often reproduce gender inequalities through formal and informal practices.

Liberal feminist perspectives emphasize the importance of equal opportunities, legal reforms, and policy interventions. Radical and post-structural feminist approaches draw attention to deeper cultural and institutional factors that shape women's experiences within organizations (Blackmore, 2013).

The theory is particularly relevant to this study because it facilitates analysis of how educational governance structures, legal frameworks, and institutional cultures influence women's access to leadership opportunities. It also provides a basis for examining how transformative reforms can challenge gender inequalities and promote inclusive leadership.

8. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework underpinning this study proposes that women's advancement into educational leadership is influenced by the interaction of legal frameworks, policy environments, institutional governance structures, barriers, opportunities, and transformative practices.



Source: Author's construct (2024) based on Acker (2012); Bush (2020); Morley (2013); UNESCO (2023).

9. Methodology Research Paradigm

The study adopted an interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes understanding participants' experiences and perceptions within their social contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Research Design

A qualitative case study design was employed to provide an in-depth exploration of women's experiences in educational leadership.

Study Area

The study was conducted in selected educational institutions across Zimbabwe, including primary schools, secondary schools, and district education offices.

Participants

Twenty-five participants were involved:

- 10 female school heads
- 8 deputy heads
- 5 senior female teachers
- 2 district education officers

Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was used to identify information-rich participants with relevant leadership experience (Patton, 2015). Snowball sampling was subsequently employed to identify additional participants through referrals.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through:

- Semi-structured interviews
- Two focus group discussions
- Document analysis

Documents reviewed included:

- Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013)
- National Gender Policy
- Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education policy documents
- Gender equality reports

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework involving familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and report writing.

NVivo software assisted in coding and organizing qualitative data.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was ensured through:

- Triangulation
- Member checking
- Reflexive journaling
- Audit trails
- Thick descriptions

Ethical Considerations

Participants provided informed consent. Confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw were guaranteed throughout the study.

10. Findings and Discussion

The study sought to explore the barriers, opportunities, and transformative practices influencing women's advancement into educational leadership positions in Zimbabwe. Four major themes emerged from the data: gendered institutional cultures, policy-practice gaps, professional support systems, and transformative governance practices.

Theme 1: Gendered Institutional Cultures

The findings revealed that educational leadership continues to be shaped by deeply entrenched gender stereotypes and patriarchal norms. Participants consistently reported that leadership is often perceived as a masculine domain, resulting in women being overlooked for leadership positions despite possessing the requisite qualifications and experience.

One school head remarked:

"Women are expected to work harder to prove that they can lead. Men are often assumed to be leaders by default."

Another participant observed:

"When a woman is assertive, she is labeled difficult, while the same behavior is praised in men as strong leadership."

These findings support existing literature indicating that gender stereotypes remain significant barriers to women's leadership progression (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Shakeshaft, 2011). Feminist scholars argue that leadership norms are historically rooted in masculine conceptions of authority, resulting in institutional cultures that privilege male leadership styles (Acker, 2012).

The findings further suggest that educational institutions continue to reproduce societal gender norms, thereby limiting women's opportunities for advancement. Similar observations have been reported in Southern African contexts where patriarchal structures continue to influence leadership selection and organizational practices (Moorosi, 2015).

Theme 2: Policy-Practice Gaps in Educational Leadership

A significant finding was the existence of a disconnect between policy commitments and practical implementation. Participants acknowledged the existence of constitutional provisions, gender policies, and institutional guidelines promoting equality. However, many expressed concern regarding the limited enforcement of these frameworks.

One deputy head stated:

"Policies supporting women are available on paper, but implementation remains weak. There is little monitoring to ensure that these policies actually change leadership representation."

Document analysis confirmed that Zimbabwe possesses a relatively progressive legal framework supporting gender equality. The Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) guarantees equality before the law and prohibits gender-based discrimination. Similarly, the National Gender Policy advocates increased representation of women in leadership positions (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013).

However, participants indicated that institutional accountability mechanisms remain inadequate. Promotion procedures were frequently described as opaque, with limited transparency regarding selection criteria and decision-making processes.

These findings align with Morley's (2013) argument that formal equality measures do not automatically produce substantive equality. Without effective monitoring, enforcement, and accountability mechanisms, policy commitments may have limited impact on organizational practices.

The findings also support UNESCO's (2023) observation that implementation challenges remain a major obstacle to achieving gender equity in educational leadership globally.

Theme 3: Professional Support Systems as Leadership Enablers

Mentorship, networking, and leadership development programmes emerged as critical enablers of women's advancement into educational leadership.

Participants who had benefited from mentorship relationships reported greater confidence, improved leadership competencies, and enhanced career progression opportunities.

One school head explained:

"My mentor helped me understand leadership responsibilities and encouraged me to apply for positions that I would otherwise have considered beyond my reach."

Similarly, another participant noted:

"Professional networks gave me access to information about opportunities, training programmes, and leadership experiences from other women."

These findings are consistent with research demonstrating the importance of mentorship and professional support systems in facilitating women's leadership advancement (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Leadership development programmes were also identified as valuable mechanisms for building administrative competencies, strategic planning skills, and confidence. Participants emphasized the importance of institutionalizing such programmes to ensure that aspiring women leaders receive adequate preparation for leadership responsibilities.

The findings suggest that access to professional support structures can help mitigate some of the structural barriers affecting women's leadership trajectories.

Theme 4: Transformative Governance Practices

Participants emphasized the need for systemic institutional reforms rather than isolated interventions.

Several transformative practices were identified as critical for promoting gender-inclusive educational governance:

Gender-responsive recruitment and promotion

Participants advocated transparent recruitment procedures that minimize bias and ensure equal opportunities for all qualified candidates.

Leadership succession planning

Respondents highlighted the need for institutions to deliberately identify and prepare women for future leadership roles.

Gender audits and monitoring

Participants recommended annual gender audits to assess representation patterns and monitor progress toward equity goals.

Institutional accountability

Many respondents argued that educational institutions should be required to report on gender representation and leadership outcomes.

These findings support governance literature emphasizing the importance of accountability, transparency, and institutional reform in promoting equitable leadership representation (Bush, 2020).

11. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that women's underrepresentation in educational leadership is not simply an individual-level issue but rather a manifestation of broader structural, institutional, and governance challenges.

The persistence of gender stereotypes illustrates how educational institutions continue to reflect wider societal norms regarding gender and authority. Consistent with Feminist Theory, organizational cultures and leadership systems often reproduce historical patterns of exclusion that privilege men while marginalizing women (Acker, 2012).

The study further reveals a significant implementation gap between legal commitments and practical outcomes. Although Zimbabwe has established constitutional and policy frameworks supporting gender equality, these frameworks have not translated into proportional representation of women within leadership positions. This finding reinforces previous studies highlighting the limitations of policy reform in the absence of effective implementation mechanisms (Morley, 2013).

The importance of mentorship and leadership development programmes demonstrates that leadership progression is influenced by access to professional support structures. Women who receive mentorship, training, and networking opportunities are better positioned to navigate institutional barriers and pursue leadership roles.

The findings also highlight the importance of educational governance in shaping leadership outcomes. Inclusive governance structures enhance representation, improve decision-making processes, and strengthen institutional legitimacy. Consequently, increasing women's participation in educational leadership should be viewed as a strategic governance objective rather than merely a gender equity initiative.

12. Transformative Practices for Gender-Inclusive Educational Governance

The study identified several transformative practices capable of promoting women's advancement into educational

leadership.

First, educational institutions should adopt gender-responsive recruitment and promotion policies. Transparent procedures can reduce bias and increase confidence in leadership selection processes.

Second, mentorship and leadership development programmes should be institutionalized. Such initiatives provide aspiring women leaders with the knowledge, skills, and support necessary for career progression.

Third, accountability mechanisms should be strengthened. Educational authorities should monitor leadership representation and evaluate progress toward gender equity goals.

Fourth, institutions should conduct regular gender audits to identify disparities and inform corrective interventions.

Fifth, leadership succession planning should be integrated into educational governance frameworks to ensure sustainable development of future women leaders.

Collectively, these practices can contribute to more inclusive, representative, and effective educational governance systems.

13. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends the following:

1. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should develop a national framework for promoting women in educational leadership.
2. Educational institutions should establish transparent recruitment and promotion procedures.
3. Formal mentorship programmes should be institutionalized across schools and educational districts.
4. Leadership development programmes targeting women educators should be expanded.
5. Annual gender audits should be conducted to monitor leadership representation.
6. Educational institutions should publish gender-disaggregated leadership data to enhance accountability.
7. Gender-responsive indicators should be integrated into educational governance evaluation frameworks.
8. Existing educational policies should be reviewed to eliminate structural barriers that disadvantage women.
9. Professional associations should create networking platforms that support women's leadership development.
10. Government and educational stakeholders should strengthen enforcement mechanisms for gender equality policies.

14. Conclusion

This study examined the barriers, opportunities, and transformative practices influencing women's advancement into educational leadership positions in Zimbabwe. Despite constitutional guarantees, policy commitments, and international obligations promoting gender equality, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions across the education sector.

The findings reveal that gender stereotypes, patriarchal institutional cultures, weak policy implementation, and limited access to professional support systems continue to constrain women's leadership progression. At the same time, mentorship programmes, leadership development initiatives, professional networks, and governance reforms provide important opportunities for promoting gender-inclusive leadership.

The study contributes to the growing field of law and education by demonstrating that women's leadership is fundamentally a governance, rights, and social justice issue. Effective implementation of legal frameworks, strengthened accountability mechanisms, and institutional transformation are essential for achieving substantive gender equality in educational leadership.

Promoting women's participation in educational leadership is not only a matter of fairness but also a prerequisite for inclusive governance, improved decision-making, and sustainable educational development in Zimbabwe and beyond.

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