

Women Leaders Resilience Amid Challenging School Environments: A Call for Support

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ABSTRACT

The genesis of resilience in leaders lies in grit and strength to drive institutional objectives, even amid challenging environmental issues. Women leaders, particularly in schools, remain determined to drive prescribed agenda towards improvement. Success in overcoming any impediments relies on the provision of support and consideration of leaders' wellbeing. An interpretivist approach was employed to explain the voices of women leaders in determining support given amid challenging school environments. In-depth interviews were conducted with five women leaders in Tshwane South District, Gauteng province. Results show that women leaders are determined to show resilience by delivering on the core business of their work. They also face unique challenges in difficult environments whilst lacking the kind of support that promotes their wellness. Hence, the recommendation for the DBE is to offer them structured support.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Women leaders continue to break barriers amidst many trials, particularly in secondary schools within challenging contexts. Hence, they need to exude skills and attributes that enable them to withstand these challenges (Braun-Lewensohn *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, their issues are often polarised due to divergent opinions on women and leadership. Saenz (2022) echoes that polarisation (of women in this context) has been disruptive. Msila (2013) declares that women are at the helm of schools that are led successfully. Hence, a need to support women leaders and capacitate them to create inclusive spaces of trust through shows of compassion, empathy, and respect as vital propellers of leading successfully (Setlhodi, 2019). To achieve work objectives, provide decisive leadership, deal with eminent problems, and maintain the fitness of purpose, it is essential for the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to provide support for these effeminate vanguards to succeed in their leadership role (Department of Basic Education, 2017).

The experiences of women leaders vary according to the context, geopolitical, social factors, and micro-politics of the schools they lead (Msila, 2013; Naidoo & Perumal, 2014), especially because of prejudices. Biases that often impede performance, particularly in a diverse society, should be eradicated to enable fortitude (Mayer *et al.*, 2018). Setlhodi (2018) and Braun-Lewensohn *et al.* (2022)

declare that it is essential for the DBE to provide support for these women in their development, resilience, and leadership. This is particularly in problematic contexts whilst also enhancing their other roles in society, such as motherhood, as well as dealing with other complex issues. Grant (2005) advances that women leaders barely acquire the necessary support because they usually have to prove their worth as leaders, typically under trying conditions. Thus threatening their mental health and wellbeing, therefore raising a need to support them.

The following question guided this research: How are women leaders supported amid challenging school environments?

2. EXPLORING RESILIENCE IN WOMEN LEADERSHIP

Challenging environments require courageous leaders to take initiative through difficulties and drive change (Shelestov, 2022). Resilience is a show of courage, daring people out of their comfort zones to perform notwithstanding difficulties. Resilient leaders show progressive growth and can adapt, drive change within a risky landscape, maintain a steady and functional healthy trajectory, be considerate in harnessing relationships, and maintain the wellbeing of self and others whilst finding personal growth (Southwick *et al.*, 2017). Their compassion enables a humanistic approach to permeate practice as they provide leadership



for the greater good of everyone. The scope of humanism is based on the attainment of the greater good for others to improve the quality of their state of being (Pearce & Lake, 2019). Showing resilience has the propensity to enable others to advance and transform, thereby enabling willingness to tackle challenges and improve the undesired situation.

Women principals in challenging environments encounter obstacles that their male counterparts do not confront. They 'must' prove their competencies and capabilities to appease their critics (Schmidt & Mestry, 2015). In this case, their resilience is based on knowledge and skills of adapting positively to their environment (Masten & Obradović, 2006) or running the risk of impacting their mental health. Their resilience not only contributes to adaptation but also to excelling and thriving behavioural patterns above expectations. After all, the community expects women leaders to create better life opportunities for learners and ascertain that they eventually get a quality education (Lumby, 2015), even though challenges emanating from other parties, such as unions, can make it difficult to fulfil these hopes.

It is common for teachers and educational staff to belong to teachers' unions in industrialized countries like the UK and South Africa (Frost, 2016). The purpose of trade and teacher unions is to protect the rights and interests of their constituencies. However, in schools where unionism is rife, there is a prevalence of diminished school management and leadership (Msila, 2014). While teacher unions might benefit their members as teachers, they might concurrently be detrimental to the whole school and the whole education process. The reason for this damage is that the common approach of certain teacher unions is antagonistic instead of collaborative (Darlington, 2014). Often, unions only zoom into the interests of their members at the expense of other stakeholders, including learners. As this seems to be the *modus operandi* of certain teacher unions, it is difficult to change their foundational approach of fighting for the rights of fellow 'trade unionists.' The question could be whether teachers are 'traders' or should be more accurately classified as professionals.

Women principals also face the challenge of rife unionism, and the fact that they are women could cause volatility and further exacerbate the challenges encountered throughout their leadership. There are other unique challenges faced by women leading unstable environments, which are brought about by poverty and lack of learners they service (Naidoo & Perumal, 2014). Ngcobo and Tikly (2010) mention that society tends to have unrealistic expectations from school leaders based on deprivation or challenging circumstances. If these expectations are not met, then women principals withstand such pressure, including calling them ineffective since they are women and, therefore, deemed less efficient than men (Casas-Arce & Saiz, 2015).

Additionally, principalship for women can bring aspects of role overload, where they must fulfil different demanding roles to meet the expectations of staff, family, and the community (Vilhjalmsson & Kristjansdottir, 2006). The balancing of work and life tends to be more difficult for women because of their daily responsibilities.

Most principals in deprived areas take on caregiving and learner-supportive roles in everyday leadership tasks (Paine, 2009). The added non-academic demands placed on principals require them to be resilient. Generally, female principals were found to be better prepared for principalship than their male counterparts as they were psychologically and practically prepared for leadership positions (De Bruyn & Mestry, 2020). It took longer before they applied for leadership positions, even being persuaded to take on this mammoth task (*ibid*). This over-preparedness often contributes to the resilience of women principals in overcoming challenges, thereby exuding compassion. Women leaders, particularly in these contexts, are expected to lead with compassion and care (Oplatka, 2017). Leading with compassion was one of the key competencies in the study by Janse van Vuuren and van der Bank (2023). Compassion can promote wellness, particularly in challenging environments.

One of the strategies used to promote wellness for women leaders is creating support networks and communities of practice (Phillips & Grandy, 2018). Mentoring is also an effective tool for reducing leaders' stress levels and burnout (DeMatthews, 2018; DeMatthews *et al.*, 2021). Self-care is often overlooked and needs prioritisation to ensure women school principals' overall wellbeing and resilience (Shabazz-Anderson, 2022).

A study by Pillay (2020) found that mindfulness and positive affect positively predicted resilience in individuals. Both are predictors of resilience and seem to be psychological factors contributing to women principals' tenacity and staying power in challenging contexts.

3. METHODOLOGY

Women are deemed the best *de facto* providers of insight about their experiences (Naidoo & Perumal, 2014). In this study, an interpretivist approach is employed to explain the voices of women leaders in determining support given amid challenging school environments, using a qualitative methodology and thereby descriptive (Mertens, 2010; Yin, 2011). A case of five women leaders, purposefully sampled from Tshwane South District in Gauteng province, was employed. Acquiring their in-depth experiences in becoming resilient when leading in challenging secondary school contexts and their impression of whether or not support was provided was crucial. These leaders were either permanent or acting in their positions with a wealth of experience in various levels of leadership in schools.

This study aimed to explain women leaders' voices in determining support given amid challenging school environments. This article argues insufficient support for women leaders in challenging environments. The participants' demographics are presented in Table I.

As per the ethical clearance granted, semi-structured face-to-face interview questions were used for participants who consented to relay their lived experiences (Msila, 2013). The concepts of resilience, dealing with challenges and providing support informed the construction of open-ended interview questions.

As requested, the participants also shared their journaled experiences, which were added to the collected

TABLE I: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

Participant code	Age	Highest qualification	Years in post	Leadership training attended
P1	47	M. Tech.	7	Executive leadership
DP1	45	B.Ed. (Honours) Physics	5	Induction
DP2	56	B.Comm.	1	School leadership
DP3	57	Diploma in Education	2	School leadership
DP4	54	B.Ed. (Honours)	10	Policy review

documents for analysis, such as the staff and SMT minutes (Mertens, 2010).

Sampled women leaders were observed formally and informally using the developed observation grid (Ramatsui, 2022). The above three modes of data collection enabled triangulation to confirm the trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell, 2014).

Tesch's data analysis approach was employed (Creswell, 2009). Through this inductive process of examining, selecting, categorising, comparing, synthesising, and interpreting collected data, the following themes emerged:

- Determination of women leaders: showing resilience,
- Challenges of women leading in difficult environments,
- Delivery on the core business,
- Wellness of women leaders.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The success of resiliency, particularly in challenging environments, has the potential to diminish over time, particularly in the absence of structured support, more so for women in school leadership positions. Resilience either wanes or waxes based on how leaders generally, and women leaders specifically, are supported mainly in notable environments laced with difficulties. Setlhodi (2022) notes that established relations determine inherent culture and influence the decorum of the environment, particularly where a show of resilience and compassion permeates, as outlined in the literature review above.

Nonetheless, results indicate that the difference in an opportunity to turn around the reality of challenging contexts relies on the way in which leaders perceive support given or not. To guide approaches that comply with the responsibilities that come with their role, women leaders require structured programmes meant to enable them to deal with challenges (Van Wyk, 2012). This came out poignantly during engagements. Comfort in backing leaders through various means debatably rests in perceptible means and knowledge that assume resilient posture amid challenges. The themes emerging from collected data attest to this assertion.

4.1. Determination of Women Leaders: Showing Resilience

During the data collection process, the researchers observed that some participants demonstrated an inclination to achieve set goals and confront undesirable conduct by the teachers. Leimon *et al.* (2011) posit that orientation and career pathing, consideration of the holistic

rate of resignations, and recruitment processes of women into leadership positions must encourage a sense of purpose in women. Purposefulness creates determination to forge ahead and resist anything that may deter progress. Ramatsui (2022) found that women leaders demonstrated a strong will to succeed in their leadership roles and were unfazed amid resistance and restraint emanating from unstable contexts.

"... change is inevitable, upon joining the school, I had to bring that transformation. It was such a battle, with the unions also involved. I successfully transformed staffing by redeploying those that were not qualified to teach the subjects they were allocated because I had a goal ..." (P1)

Determination informs the ability to restructure one's own attitude, which in turn enables the cultivation of inner fortitude. Mampane (2014) found variables such as confidence, internal locus of control, social support, toughness, commitment, and achievement orientation among resilience, determination, and adversity regardless of prevalent challenges, particularly in women. Adversity can lead to courage (Mokwena, 2023). We advance that encouraging women to be resilient in tackling challenges amid adversity can be the basis for ushering support strategies in difficult contexts.

4.2. Challenges of Women Leading in Difficult Environments

Cultural attitudes remain high on the list of challenges faced by women leaders, compounded by stereotyping formulated through gender-valued attributes (Latchanah & Singh, 2016). DP1 averred:

"There would those teachers who don't want to comply especially if you hold them accountable as a female manager." (DP1)

Accountability on educators' performance remains the first challenge leaders face in attaining transformation. Msila (2013) declares that often, women principals are drivers of curriculum change, hold teachers accountable, and lead support of staff plus learners, whereas their male counterparts focus on administration, which is not much comparatively. Two women principals specifically spoke about holding educators accountable regarding learner outcomes.

"I am passionate about curriculum issues and that is my strength ... hence I profile teachers, motivate, support, reward, and hold them accountable ... I also support learners and offer them study space and resources ... these efforts have brought about desired change and improvement even though there is still compliance issues with some teachers but I am able to remind them of our agreements ..." (DP4)

The above demonstrates prowess, resilience, and determination to transform practices to ensure desired

performance. Unionism, as highlighted by P1, is also one thorny issue that women leaders endure. This is supported by Msila (2014), who found that unions seem to cause paralysis in school progress.

"I had to bring that transformation. It was such a BAT-TLE, unions were involved." (P1)

The minutes reflected clear direction given regardless of the initial resistance to changes, particularly in P1, DP2, and DP4 schools. In DP4's school, the principal (male) avoided interviews and referred the researchers to his female deputy (DP4), who was the one driving teaching and learning, plus teacher and learner support in the school, with little or no support from the principal. She additionally had to oversee the geopolitical and social factors impacting progress by arranging caregiving for needy learners and referring hard-up teachers for wellness.

"We know our learners and because of this nutrition they are very free to come with ... and ask if they don't have mealie meal at home, they'll come with a bucket and just give them that." (DP4)

The research findings indicated that the progression of women is affected by social and cultural beliefs, stereotypes, personal barriers, networking, tokenism, selection, culture, mentorship, and work-life balance. Additionally, the expectation for women principals is to be nurturing, caring, and compassionate to both teachers and learners, in contrast to men. This requires the DBE to have structured support services for women leaders so they can assume authority in ensuring the delivery of the core business for schooling.

4.3. Delivery on the Core Business

Leadership entails providing direction to those under the leader's charge. Singly, the leader cannot succeed but needs to provide guidance and influence processes for continuous improvement of performance and delivery of the set objectives. Accomplishing deliverables and getting everyone involved depends on the direction taken, support given by the leader, and initiatives to increase knowledge (Smith, 2008). Informed leaders are focused and show grit. Mayer *et al.* (2018) suggest that women leaders who manage to change narratives and transform practices succeed in getting things done. To that end, they insist on the provision of quality education (Govindasamy & Mestry, 2022).

"... I want to transform the school, by improving the results of the school, because my call is improving results and maintain quality... So, for me to transform the school, I had to change the staff allocation. I also collaborate with teachers by going to class as an assistant teacher." (P1)

Leaders who collaborate with all stakeholders win their cooperation and can achieve a lot (Kahunzire *et al.*, 2023). Where there is collaboration, a show of compassion and care is enabled, resulting in work done and objectives achieved through engagement by all stakeholders (teachers, learners, and parents) in the school (Setlhodi, 2020).

Encouraging parental involvement through attendance of meetings also forms part of the intent to deliver on the core responsibilities. Sesinyi and Gcelu (2023) found that leaders who insist on parents attending meetings achieved significant improvement in performance and were able to

provide the needed support. In this study, we explored women leaders' perceptions in determining support given, including that of parents in navigating challenging school environments, by outlining how participants perceived support towards delivering on the core business of their work. Even though parental support is commendable in all schools, some leaders expressed a lack thereof, especially those who needed to complement remedial intervention with further support at home.

"...sometimes we need a parent to come to school, we are not able to get them, to get through to them, even those learners that have parents, you find that the parents are not active in the education of their children." (DP3)

Lack of parental support complicates instructional delivery, thus negatively affecting the wellness of related staff and women leaders. Moreover, schools that underperform must account to the provincial head of the department (HoD) (South African Schools Act 84, 1996, 58B), which itself is an arduous exercise.

The results of indicator thirteen of a survey conducted by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) regarding principals' views on support given by the Department show the variable that is not comparable because of the response rate algorithms during the analysis of data (Department of Basic Education, 2017). The participants also alluded to, at times, erratic and haphazard visits meant for supporting schools. If those meant to support school leaders are unable to sufficiently plan for support visits and account for the views regarding support given by the DBE (as per the survey report), disheartening responses by the participants regarding support by the DBE are justifiable.

To that end, school leaders are required to remain accountable, with minimal support, whilst further assuring good governance and performance. We advance that women leaders require more support due to many other responsibilities outside fiduciary duties, as well as challenges advanced because they are women, as found in their written accounts (journals). In her analysis, Moorosi (2010) found that compared to men, women leaders go through three stages, namely, anticipation, acquisition, and performance landscape in their career paths, which are influenced by personal, organisational, and social factors. Similarly, the latter affects their leadership practices and performance. These women leaders are expected to act decisively regarding non-performance SASA South African Schools Act 84 (1996), whereas they, too, struggle with their performance. Without structured support, particularly in challenging environments, these leaders may be tempted to escalate leadership (passing the buck) rather than manage consequences, possibly due to looming wellness-related matters that overwhelm them.

4.4. Wellness of Women Leaders

Challenging environments for women leaders may result in serious health issues if not curbed. This suggests that there is a need to support them. Leaders who are supported take initiative in their development and advancement of knowledge (Leimon *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, they can tackle challenges within their context. They are also able to build their own support network and deliver quality

education. The fact that the male principal shifted curriculum management and support to his female deputy, as captured in a journal, points to the absence of support and mindfulness of their wellness. Having these women leaders show courage and resilience does not mean they are not affected by their circumstances. A show of resourcefulness and courage can lead to wellness issues, particularly when there is little or no support from the seniors. Moorosi (2010) argues that with little or no support, women may pull hard in trying to change their schools' performance trajectory.

In all instances during data collection, no clear indication of support was provided to the participants. Hence, they felt the need to push against all odds and show resilience, often at the expense of the other responsibilities they have. This may harm their health due to possible issues that may occur because of having to do more than they should. Particularly because women also care for their families and, at times, hold other responsibilities.

One of the participants mentioned a lack of support from the District office, who, due to pressure from the unions, advised her to withdraw the case against teachers who had to be redeployed to other schools because they were not qualified to teach in a secondary school as well as the subjects they were teaching hence the school was underperforming in these subjects. Therefore, she could not hold them accountable because they were not subject specialists. P1 complained that:

"... the unions put the Director under pressure. ... She came and said, don't you think we should back off? We've got pressure from the unions." (P1)

Lack of support by seniors has a direct impact on the wellness of employees. Wellness for women leaders might mean devising means to lower stress levels. The burden of proving their worth amidst career challenges may eventually compromise their physical, social, and psychological wellbeing. Hence, Moorosi's (2010) problematising women's psycho-social issues compared to their male counterparts. Resilience as a skill thus gives women leaders the ability and coping mechanisms to model the attributes of good leadership in their institution.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, although women leaders showed resilience in the delivery of the core business within challenging environments, failure to have focused support mechanisms for these women may compromise their health and wellness and, therefore, initial successes may prove unsustainable. This article recommends that the DBE should consider a structured support programme, particularly for women leaders. More studies must be conducted in this area to learn to establish ways in which lack of support can affect women leaders' wellness and lead to mental health issues, among others.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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