

Perceived Promotional Possibilities of Female Women Principals in the South African Context

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Abstract The gender gap in leadership positions is particularly noticeable in South African schools despite efforts to address gender imbalances. The shortage of female school principals, especially in secondary schools, is a major concern despite sufficient qualified female educators. The purpose of this study was to investigate the promotion opportunities and career paths of female principals at South African secondary schools as well as the aspect of challenges, stereotyping, social and cultural factors, and perceptions about themselves. A qualitative approach, within the interpretivist paradigm, was used to shed more light from a leadership point of view on the paths that the respective participants had to follow to finally be appointed. Data collection was done using semi-structured interviews with seven female principals. The data were transcribed and analyzed to give a reliable picture. An overview of female school leadership, as well as the paths that led there, was one of the themes of the study. Findings from this study showed that women do not necessarily have to possess masculine characteristics to take over the leadership of a school, but that their unique character traits are sufficient to benefit them in this regard. One of the biggest challenges detected was maintaining a balanced work and family life, which results in women sometimes not fulfilling their obligations properly. On the other hand, family obligations may be the reason why women decide against applying for a promotion. The study concluded that policies exist to govern or prevent prejudice but when not adhered to create an indictment towards the effectiveness of policymakers. Furthermore, existing policies and legislation are not applied strictly enough to ensure that women are indeed considered for leadership positions,

which makes them feel let down by authorities. The study recommends that there should be more opportunities for women to apply for principal positions since South African education consists of more females than males.

Keywords Promotion Paths, Perceptions, Challenges, Female Principals, Secondary Schools

1. Introduction

Although women in senior leadership positions in the educational field excel globally, they often still face several challenges [1]. The gender gap in leadership positions is particularly noticeable in South African schools [2]. There are differences in the leadership styles of men and women, and women are sometimes forced to assert themselves in heterogeneous schools [3]. Despite efforts to address gender imbalances, South Africa still grapples with these issues [4]. Women still face the challenge of being seen as leaders when applications are considered, because their potential is not recognized [5]. Instead of policies correcting past imbalances, they only slightly increase female representation [1]. However, the shortage of female school principals, especially in secondary schools, is a major concern seen against the background of the relationship between most women in South Africa and their under-representation in the educational profession [6, 7]. The gender gap between men and women in a school leadership position therefore persists despite sufficient female educators [7]. According to Ngcobo [8], the

appointment of women as teachers and men as principals is a common trend in South African schools. The Department of Basic Education [7] supports this statement by providing data showing the disparity between male and female principals.

The literature review focuses on opportunities, challenges, a principal's job description, legislative support for women's advancement and obstacles encountered from a feminist point of view [9].

2. An Overview of the Literature

Since 1994 there have been several changes in the South African education system involving more women being appointed to school leadership roles. However, despite women making up 68% of the teaching workforce, only 36% are principals [10]. In contrast, there are 119,579 male teachers, of which 14,337 are principals, while out of 257,633 female teachers there are only 8,210 in this position [10]. Although legislation supports the growth of women's careers, they still face more challenges than their male counterparts [9].

Female principals' job description, legislation to support the advancement of their careers as well as obstacles encountered are discussed in the first part of the literature review. In the second part, women's leadership views on their career paths are discussed from a socialist-feminist perspective.

2.1. Feminist Theory

Feminism encompasses a wide-ranging and intricate concept that opposes prejudice and domination of women [11]. It aims to elevate women's status and highlight how male dominance has historically stifled female contributions. In South Africa, patriarchal norms persist, dictating women's roles as caregivers, which can hinder their identity and competence [12]. Cultural and traditional factors impose barriers to female leadership, requiring women to prove themselves [13]. Stereotypes, cultural challenges, and male dominance impede women's progress in leadership roles, and are not limited to South Africa, but occur worldwide [11]. Certain South African cultures, like North Sotho and Bapedi, resist female leadership [11].

Feminism, as described by Bailey [11], seeks gender equality, emphasizing women's rights and equal opportunities. Various feminist theories address unequal gender roles: liberal feminism advocates for equal access, socialist-feminism critiques class structures, radical feminism targets systemic gender prejudice, and cultural feminism explores gender differences.

2.2. Women as School Leaders versus Legislation

In South Africa, the Constitution [14] upholds values of human dignity, equality, and human rights by aiming to

ensure equal rights for all citizens [11,15]. Article 9, which is considered extremely important, deals with equality [15] for which legislation, policies and measures are necessary [14]. The Bill of Rights (1996) guarantees equal treatment and prohibits discrimination [15]. To promote gender equality in promotions, several key legislations have been enacted [15]:

- Employment Equity Act (Act 55 of 1998): Affirmative action measures aim to provide equal employment opportunities.
- National Education Policy (Act 27 of 1996): It is designed to reduce discrimination against women, increase female representation in management, and elevate women as leaders.
- South African Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996): It addresses past imbalances and is in favor of eradicating discrimination.
- Employment of Educators Act (Act 76 of 1998): Emphasizing competence and correcting imbalances in appointments.
- Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (Act 4 of 2000): This Act focuses on promoting equality through awareness programs and legislation.

Despite this legislation, women are still under-represented in leadership roles [15,11]. The authors are of the opinion that there are opportunities, such as training and mentoring for women. Recruitment of women for leadership development is, for example, a priority for the Department of Basic Education in order to promote gender equality [16]. Despite South African women occupying various teaching professions, Bailey [11] is of the opinion that they are not easily appointed to leadership positions. This is attributed to traditional gender roles, as highlighted by Davids [10], who notes that women tend to be seen as caregivers, while men are seen as natural leaders. May's [9] perception argues that communities often assume that leaders must be male. Progress in gender transformation has been slow [17], which was not always easily noticed. In developing countries, economic, social, and political factors influence women's access to leadership roles in schools [18].

Management and leadership are intertwined, as Wajdi [19] emphasizes that both skills are essential for effective leadership. Hejase et al. [17] assert that leaders, regardless of gender, must possess management skills (easily learned) and leadership skills (often more challenging). According to the authors, female leaders should possess qualities such as shared vision, optimism, and effective team building, and should dedicate themselves to protecting and developing the staff.

The style of women in leadership positions is clear and is characterized by flexibility and cooperation with an emphasis on nurturing and supporting subordinates [10]. Women often maintain a transformational leadership style, by inspiring others and focusing on strengths and

opportunities within the organization. This style is associated with higher organizational performance and men are often outperformed by women with transformational qualities. Female leaders are also more personally oriented, in that they consider the needs of individual team members [17].

In summary, it can be assumed that female leaders maintain a facilitative, democratic, and participatory leadership style that emphasizes open communication, conflict resolution, empathy, creativity and individual attention [17]. These characteristics align with a people-focused leadership style from which it can be concluded that women are ready to excel as future leaders.

2.3. Promotion Route of Female School Principals

The promotion route followed by female school principals varies worldwide and is complex due to personal, social and organizational factors [20]. Planning the promotion route is often postponed due to family responsibilities and because of the maternal role which is a priority for most women. South African women face, like women in other countries, several challenges regarding the advancement route they follow [21]. This route involves three phases:

- Anticipation Phase: Women prepare themselves for leadership positions by acquiring knowledge and skills through qualifications, training, workshops, and informal networks.
- Acquisition Phase: Women are deliberately looking for leadership positions that require specific skills and ambition. However, in certain cases, prejudice is often experienced, especially in secondary schools.
- Performance Phase: Women in leadership roles face under-representation challenges, highlighting the need for gender equality.

Research by Komiti and Moorosi [20] indicates that female principals are often inspired by female teachers. Loyola [22] found that successful female principals possess qualities such as motivation, self-esteem, spirituality, a strong will, career development skills and the ability to balance family and work. They also emphasize values in career development. In South Africa, Van Jaarsveld et al. [23] found that female principals start working as typical young teachers after which they are gradually promoted. However, the Canadian promotion route is more structured in terms of formal education, teaching experience, specific qualifications, completion of a Principal Qualification Program (PQP), internship and recommendations. Finally, there is no universal blueprint for the promotion of female principals due to cultural, educational, and organizational contexts.

2.4. Challenges Experienced by Female Principals

Female principals in particular face challenges such as stereotyping, gender inequality, gender discrimination,

intrinsicity and extremism. Then the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles is also a cause for concern [9] as women make up such a large part of the teaching force [7]. However, these challenges do not only occur in South Africa. There are worldwide similar obstacles to be faced. In countries like the United Kingdom, the United States and New Zealand, gender equality in leadership remains a problem as men, rather than women, are appointed as principals [15]. Australia and Greece have made significant progress in promoting gender equality and female leadership in education [15]. In Australia, women held 62% of leadership positions in schools in 2008, largely as a result of affirmative action programs.

Challenges can be categorized as intrinsic and extrinsic.

2.4.1. Intrinsic Challenges

Intrinsic challenges are internal obstacles related to behaviors and attitudes, often rooted in societal stereotypes and traditional gender roles. Women may struggle with issues like low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, fear of success and a lack of planning. These challenges can prevent women from aspiring to be appointed to leadership positions, as they often internalize societal negativity [9]. In many developing countries, the ongoing issue of lack of self-confidence among women is exacerbated by entrenched male dominance and stereotypes. These factors often lead women to doubt their abilities and to view male leadership styles as superior, which undermines their self-assurance [9]. In addition, women's fear of success or failure is fueled by concerns about social rejection and difficulty distinguishing between personal failure and task-related setbacks [15]. Furthermore, applied pressure to conform to traditional gender roles and community expectations discourages women from pursuing leadership roles [9].

2.4.2. Extrinsic Challenges

Extrinsic challenges are external obstacles that affect women's entry into leadership roles. These challenges often stem from historical gender roles, societal discrimination, and family responsibilities, which lead women to follow a different career path than men. Gender inequality is an ongoing issue in the South African education system, where specific roles are closely related to particular genders [9]. Despite legal measures aimed at addressing this issue, leadership positions are often still reserved for men [8]. This disparity is exacerbated by global stereotypes that associate leadership with masculinity and teaching with femininity [15]. As a result, women in leadership positions often experience resistance arising from perceived deviations from traditional leadership characteristics [15]. Furthermore, discrimination on gender remains a formidable challenge for women in leadership positions – both directly and indirectly [9]. Sexist attitudes and resistance to women's leadership styles also have a negative effect on career progression. Apart from this, women have the extremely difficult task of finding a balance between leadership roles and family

responsibilities – a challenge exacerbated by traditional gender role expectations and a lack of spousal support [21]. These factors highlight the multiple gender-related obstacles to women's advancement in the South African education system [9], [8], [15], [21].

Finally, the intrinsic and extrinsic challenges faced by women leaders have a worldwide influence on their representation in the educational field. These challenges are rooted in societal norms, stereotypes as well as historical gender roles, and addressing them is crucial to achieve gender equality in leadership.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Paradigm

According to Bertram and Christiansen [24] and Creswell [25], research paradigms are shaped by individuals' worldviews, which influence qualitative researchers' choice of paradigms. These paradigms are intertwined with cultures. Interpretive paradigms aim to understand and depict meaningful social actions and human experiences, which guide research questions, data collection and interpretation [24]. Nauyoma-Hamupembe [26] emphasizes that interpretive researchers seek to understand human action, behavior, and subjective experiences. Cohen et al. [27] emphasize the interpretive paradigm's value in understanding the subjective nature of human experiences. Interpretivism also emphasizes the importance of understanding subjective meanings in behavior by interpreting facts within required social conventions [28].

3.2. Research Approach

Qualitative research differs in purpose and beliefs from quantitative research [25]. Qualitative research is characterized by coding data in words, focusing on meaning of natural phenomena to participants, and defining concepts through themes and involvement in participant interaction [25]. Qualitative research aims to develop theories about social or human problems, which capture the complexity of natural settings [29]. It encompasses the richness and multiple dimensions of studied phenomena, which is applicable to this descriptive research that examines participants' opinions [28]. Creswell [25] describes the following stages in qualitative research:

- Exploration and understanding of the research problem.
- Literature review to justify the problem.

- A broad definition of the research purpose, questions and participants' experiences.
- Data collection from a small number of individuals to capture their perspectives.
- Analyses of flexible data by considering the researcher's subjectivity and reflexivity.

Qualitative research involves studying behavior in a natural context without any external manipulation or control. Environments in which this type of research takes place are usually classrooms, clinics, or neighborhoods, which enable researchers to understand behavior without external interference. O'Dweyer and Bernauer [30] assert that qualitative research reveals multiple realities and perspectives by researchers as well as participants who constitute knowledge. Creswell [25] emphasizes that qualitative research captures reliable data of participants' knowledge and experiences in natural settings, which applies to this study on female principals.

The phenomenological methodology, based on the qualitative research paradigm [31], seeks to explore the deeper meaning of individual experiences and then describe those human experiences [32]. Scheumann [33] refers to its use to investigate inner experiences other than those of everyday life, while Haradhan [34] applies it to sociology, psychology, health sciences and education. Phenomenological research can be hermeneutic (descriptive) or transcendental (interpretative) [35].

The hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used in this research to give a detailed account of female principals' experiences and to draw a general conclusion from them.

3.3. Population and Sampling

A convenient sampling was conducted for the purpose of this study. Convenience sampling, as Harding [36] puts it, is used by researchers for convenience in terms of time and distance. For the purpose of this study, female principals were selected in the area where they live as this type of sampling applies to accessible areas, as stated by Harding [36] and supported by Creswell [25]. Due to the limited number of female principals in the Northwest and Gauteng provinces, the researcher selected four schools in each province, a total of eight schools, for this study. All the selected principals met the criteria of being female and in leadership positions at secondary schools, which is in line with the study's focus on the route that female principals should follow. The table below contains participants' biographical information:

Table 1. Biographical Information of Participants

	Highest Qualification	Experience as Post Level 1 (teacher)	Experience as Post Level 2 (Head of Department)	Experience as Deputy Principal	Experience as Principal
Principal A	BEd Honors	15 years	4 years	3 years	7 years
Principal B	BEd honors	12 years	5 years	4 years	8 years
Principal C	Degree	8 years	6 years	5 years	14 years
Principal D	Degree + diploma	7 years	4 years	6 years	12 years
Principal E	Degree + diploma	6 years	4 years	7 years	18 years
Principal F	Degree + diploma	19 years	None	None	6 years
Principal G	Degree	5 years	2 years	7 years	3 years

3.4. Data Collection

Qualitative research makes use of typical open or semi-structured interviews, which on the one hand promote flexibility and on the other hand collect possible varied information [29]. Semi-structured interviews with pre-prepared questions were used for this study, which ensured flexibility during the interviews [27], [29]. Individual interviews lasting approximately one hour, were conducted in a comfortable setting during school hours [25]. The researchers used an independent person to contact and invite the participants to participate in the study. The prospective schools were supplied with letters seeking permission to participate in the research, and informed consent forms for the prospective participants to sign. One of the researchers (interviewer) conducted all the interviews with the various participants. The researchers tried to make sense of the participants' actions and how they experience the reality of the phenomena in their natural environment. The researchers attempted to understand the subjective nature (participants' perspective) of their experiences without any biases. The interviewer listened carefully to the feedback from the participants to take advantage of possible new directions but was mindful not to stray from the topic. The interviewer encouraged the participants to speak freely to gain maximum from the interviews.

3.5. Data Analysis

The researcher followed Creswell's [25] guidelines for qualitative data analysis. This involved audio recordings, transcribing interviews, holistic understanding through repeated readings, data saturation, theme identification and a summary with quotes from participants.

3.6. Ethical Aspects

Before the research could begin, ethical clearance had to be obtained from North-West University. This clearance offers comprehensive protection to participants, schools under investigation, the university itself and the Department of Basic Education, emphasizing the

commitment to ethical research practices. Permission was also obtained from the Department of Basic Education and from the respective principals. Through this, selected participants are not only empowered to participate in the research but are also assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Voluntary signing of cooperation agreements could therefore take place.

Ethical standards applied throughout the research in that the principles for the prevention of plagiarism, as prescribed by the NWU's Ethics Committee, were met. Collected data which are safely kept in a safe will be destroyed after 5 years, the hardcopies will be burned and the data which are kept on a password protected external drive will be deleted completely.

4. Discussion and Findings

4.1. Findings

Findings come from the literature review, theory and data analysis from which two main themes emerged.

4.1.1. Theme 1: Principal Career and Academic Development

It was clear that participants experienced their careers differently. However, they agreed that not everyone is suited to become a principal and it often takes a remarkable person to handle all school obligations. Two principals indicated that for them this profession is a deliberate vocation for which they have worked since level 1. On the other hand, for most participants a school principal position was not a deliberate choice or something they thought about, but rather something that came their way over time. Some participants mentioned that they went through the promotion levels while others were approached to act as principal. The normal course of promotion in schools is as follows: start as a post level 1 teacher, then usually head of a department, then deputy head and finally principal. However, Participant B is a good example of someone who did not follow the normal promotion route as she was a post level 1 teacher until 2006, after which she retired from

teaching. Upon her return in 2009, she was immediately appointed to a HOD position, which was short-lived because she accepted a deputy principal position 3 years later. This participant described her promotion as follows:

The road to principalship felt hopelessly too fast, and if I am asked today why I left teaching, it was because I believed that the workload would be less and the money more in the private sector, but that was not the case.

Those promoted from level 1 to each of the following levels, adapted more easily to a principal position as they gained more leadership and management experience at each level. It is therefore not surprising that participants who did not follow the usual route had a harder time adjusting.

The question, whether there are opportunities for women to be promoted to principals, was answered informatively. "Opportunities for women and policies and legislation are synonymous with each other" is how one of the participants described the current situation when she was asked if South African women have enough promotion opportunities. The Fair Employment Act (55 of 1998) and the Personnel Administrative Measures document (PAM) (Government Gazette, 2016) are just two examples of South African policies that strive for equality in the workplace. However, participants thought twice answering the question, whether women have an equal chance to be appointed as a principal at a secondary school. Women is easily not characterized by power, status, and leadership ability, which leads them not being considered as principals at secondary schools. On the other hand, women's perceptions of advancement possibilities also play a significant role, apart from the fact that certain communities and schools' associate leadership more and more with men, especially white schools with established traditions and cultures. Participant D said the following about this:

Women have equal opportunities on paper, but in reality, women are not always favorably considered for principal positions in secondary schools.

Participant E agreed with this statement by arguing that the old traditional Afrikaans schools are more of a 'man's world' due to the long-standing perception of male authority. In a sports-dominant school, a man would much rather be appointed as principal. Legislation has already been introduced to create equal promotion opportunities for all. The Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (Act 4 of 2000) states it as follows: the purpose of this Act is the promotion of equality and the eradication of all forms of discrimination against women, including in the workplace. However, participants disagreed with each other about what the Department of Basic Education should do to create equal opportunities for men and women. Participant C argued that there should be a move away from the policy on equality. Men and women can never be equal. Each person has a specific role to fulfill, and one is not there to replace the other. Therefore, appointments should be made on merit.

According to the opinions of the participants in the research, a framework has been established through policies and legislation, such as the Equality Promotion Act, National Education Policy and Equal Employment Act, in order to achieve gender equality for leaders within education. However, as Bailey [11] believes these policies, although theoretically in place, are not practically feasible. Nevertheless, opportunities – on paper as well as in practice – involve educational empowerment, management programs offered by the Department of Education, short courses at tertiary institutions, and mentorship and coaching by experienced and retired school principals [37]. The Department of Basic Education [14] is committed to the recruitment of female principals, leadership development and gender equality initiatives. The study also revealed that, despite available opportunities, some women are still reluctant to pursue leadership positions due to factors such as self-confidence, family responsibilities and traditional views. It is also the opinion of Streicher [38] that not all female teachers accept principal positions, despite promotion possibilities. Another finding of this study is the need for appointments on merit and not on gender, as outlined in the PAM document.

This study brought to the researchers' attention female principals' varied promotion paths as well as the different challenges they face. Streicher [38] points out that unique qualities, such as empathy and nurturing, with which women are usually associated, enhance their leadership abilities. Then there are also support networks that help balance domestic and professional responsibilities. Despite challenges faced, participants continued to demonstrate determination and resilience in their pursuit of leadership roles. Furthermore, efforts by the South African government to improve promotion opportunities for women, based on social feminism, have also come to light. The value that women add to society, the need to address inequalities and the importance of bringing about social transformation are principles from the feminist theory. Legislation, on the other hand, involves the Employment Equity Act [39].

Apart from promotion levels, participants also touched on academic qualifications. All the participants agreed that there has long been a debate about academic qualifications on the one hand and work experience on the other, as well as which one is considered the most valuable. According to the participants in the research, academic training only proves that a person has succeeded at an academic level, while experience is proof of competence to handle work situations. According to most participants, practical experience compliments academic training. However, Participant F emphasized the importance of academic training. According to her, the fact that she completed a postgraduate qualification broadened her vision and equipped her with background knowledge to be able to work with people. However, theoretical knowledge is the fundamental principles on which any leadership position is based, while practical experience is gained over time, but

one still must acquire book knowledge. The other participants disagreed as academic training was of no benefit to most of them. According to them, book knowledge was subject-oriented and not specifically aimed at the management of a school and staff. Participant E argued:

Experience plays a more important role in the management of a school and its participants; I was promoted many years after my academic training and then book knowledge was already forgotten, but my experience over the years was lasting.

Participant C was of the opinion that, although it is extremely important to go through the different promotion stages, it is equally important to gain knowledge and experience in different provinces and schools as it prepares one to deal with different learners, parents, staff and situations. Because of the unknown and difficult path to leadership, every aspiring female principal needs support from colleagues and the school management team.

4.1.2. Theme 2: Challenges Experienced by Female Principals

Data and literature have shown that female principals face several challenges on their way to promotion. These challenges, intrinsic and extrinsic, involve social and cultural stereotypes, a balance between work and family obligations, psychological pressure and specific challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic [40]. Cultural beliefs often have an impact on women's advancement due to the assumption that women are not meant to lead, as highlighted by [9]. One of the biggest challenges female school principals face is maintaining a balanced work and family life as they juggle professional responsibilities with maternal and domestic duties, leading to sacrifices in their family life. However, the pandemic has forced women to balance the two worlds. Despite these challenges, female principals, like their male counterparts, face the same problems within the school context, for example motivating learners within the constraints of teaching and learning, changes in grading calculations and an ineffective district office. The cumulative impact of these challenges contributes to the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles in schools.

Although progress is being made in redressing past inequities, participants agreed that female teachers often face numerous challenges, preventing many of them from applying for principal positions. Even though South Africa has been a democratic country for 29 years, women still find it difficult to be appointed to leadership roles - not because of personal abilities and skills, but rather because of assumptions that women are not competent to lead. This comment is supported by Msila [1] who clearly states that women are not up to acting in leadership positions.

Participants gave various reasons for the few female principals compared to their male counterparts. Three participants believed one of the biggest misconceptions in

education is that men are born leaders and breadwinners of their homes, and the woman is seen rather as his subordinate. These opinions and the socialist-feminist theory agree that women are treated unfairly. This was clear from participant A's words:

In the Afrikaner culture, it prevails that the man is the leader and breadwinner for his family. The woman is the subordinate and belongs at home. She is there to maintain the house and children, while the man must earn money.

However, there were participants who did not agree with the above. Rather, they were of the opinion that the woman can indeed take the lead and be dominant in her field, but that the responsibilities of a principal are sometimes too much and that women then, as Participant C put it, prefer staying home and being a mother and wife.

Another perception that emerged from the interviews is that women are usually considered too soft to handle and discipline teenagers. According to Participant G men maintain better discipline in traditional Afrikaans schools. On the other hand, Participant D was of the opinion that Governing Bodies often disapprove of women for this reason and because of their apparent inability to manage a school. Apart from the immense criticism that South African female principals have to endure, society in general is not very lenient either.

It also appeared as if female principals were not easily accepted on a social level by male staff members. Most participants indicated that they had experienced opposition from a male staff member at some point. Participant B argued:

The male teachers were my biggest problem, because they did not want to accept me - I had to prove myself to them over a very long period and still today there are three male members of staff who do not accept my authority.

However, Participant D's opposition extended far beyond the staff room. Even parents, especially the men on the Governing Body, put tremendous pressure on her to resign, because they didn't think she could take the lead. She was tested daily and most of the men felt that she had to earn respect before she could be the head of their school. The comments of participants B and D align with the socialist-feminist theory [11] that emphasizes unfair treatment of women. In contrast, two participants indicated that they did not receive any opposition from any role players in their school. On the contrary, male staff members assisted them instead, making the transition from deputy principal to principal considerably easier. Participant A explained that she was very fortunate to work under a wonderful principal, who saw her potential and provided the necessary support and guidance to express her creativity within a safe setting.

Five of the seven participants indicated that they received incredibly good support from teachers and the management team, while two participants did not

experience the same. For example, it had been extremely difficult for Participant C to take the lead, because she faced opposition from the staff as they still considered her a deputy head. Her promotion had also been at the expense of a male colleague who had applied for the position, resulting in negative action on his part. Participant F received no support because she accepted a position as principal at a newly established farm school with no support structures.

Walking into a school with no resources in place was a challenge, but walking into a school with no deputy head, Governing Body or management team and you're 29 years old was one of the most demanding challenges of my career to date.

Although some participants did not experience any social and cultural opposition, they did experience other challenges on their promotion path to principalship. Half of the participants said that work-family balance was one of the biggest challenges for them and that their spouses had to take over the primary role in the household due to their administrative load after hours. Participant G put it as follows:

I struggled incredibly to balance my family and work, my family was neglected due to a high load of administration and time-consuming extracurricular activities.

Traditions and cultural beliefs were one of the biggest challenges participating principals experienced as it is a common perception in communities and cultures that women are not meant to lead, but that men have innate qualities to maintain discipline in schools. Rather, women are seen as subordinates in the role of mother and wife. This is consistent with the premise of May [9] that stereotypes still occur in contemporary society, that leadership is still associated with masculinity, and that women are associated with domestic tasks and obligations. It is precisely these views that socialist feminism opposes and wants to emphasize. Although some of the challenges are also experienced by male principals, the view that women are the weaker sex, is still an issue in many South African schools. Social feminism opposes all forms of prejudice [39]. In the light of the social-feminist theory, it is clear that the education authorities have made great strides to improve unequal promotion opportunities for women through legislation in the form of the Fair Employment Act (55 of 1998), as well as the amendment to the Employment Equity Act (47 of 2013) notwithstanding the fact that legislation in terms of the workplace is not always properly applied [15]. The fact that policies exist to govern or prevent prejudice but are not adhered to is an indictment of the effectiveness of policymakers. Policies are just as good or bad as its implementation and control measures.

5. Recommendations

The following recommendations to eliminate certain

issues are based on findings from this study.

Recommendations for aspiring female principals

- School leadership should be a spontaneous choice.
- Careful consideration between a professional career and the role of spouse and mother. This should go together with a family support network.
- A support network with other female principals, the Governing Body, staff, and parents.
- Avoid any negativity regarding female potential. Personal potential is not gender bound.

Recommendations for the Department of Basic Education

Legislation must provide female principals with the necessary support and concrete efforts must be made to promote gender equality. Policy documents on gender equality should be made available to female teachers as Governing Bodies do not always have the necessary knowledge of policies. Female teachers can also benefit from the availability of legislation and policies by knowing when they are being discriminated against. In addition, the selection and recruitment process of female principals need to be refined, and policy implementation and control measures needs to be assessed regularly. This needs to be accompanied by awareness campaigns which should include greater conversation and mentoring opportunities.

6. Conclusions

The research investigated promotion opportunities for female principals at secondary schools. The conventional patriarchal system that still prevails results in various problems such as stereotyping and prejudice against women on their way to promotion. Because of this system, which is a global reality, women in leadership positions in educational institutions must constantly prove themselves as effective leaders. Although women in leadership positions are well-qualified and have the necessary experience, there are still challenges linked to the profession, which female principals often experience more intensely due to opposition from various parties. Regardless of all these legislation and policies in place, this study nevertheless pointed out the underrepresentation of women in principal positions at secondary schools. An even bigger issue is that theory and the application and implementation of legislation and policies differ greatly from each other. Legislation alone is not enough to make a difference in long-standing social and cultural practices.

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