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Equal Opportunities in Educational Management in Institutions of Higher Learning: An Agenda for Gender

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Abstract

The article discusses the issue of gender disparities within education which have been long standing in many parts of the world. The discussion centres on the need for educational management boards to balance the selection and ranking of administrative-cum-managerial staff by practising non discrimination and by ensuring equal rights in the appropriate steps to higher positions of management, based on the notion of meritocracy and gender representation. Relevant examples have been drawn from the Zimbabwean context.

Concerns about gender disparities within education have been long standing in many parts of the world (Davies 1990, Dorsey *et al* 1989, Gray 1989, Shakeshaft 1887, Saint 1992). Major differences of status and position, have divided men and women teachers throughout. Recently, the issue of equity in educational administration has become of increasing concern to educational policy makers, especially in developing countries. For example, in a review of the national planning documents of a number of countries, Davies (1990) found that inequality in the workplace was a key consideration of their governments. As she noted, although most developing countries refer to equality and egalitarianism in their policy documents, they have done very little to fulfil these noble objectives. In Zimbabwe, for instance, teaching has remained a male dominated profession, as shown by the fact that at 2003, the 15% women secondary school heads in the country were drawn from only 42% women secondary school teachers. The figures at primary school level were even more disproportionate, with only 5% of the school heads being female, drawn from a 50% female teaching force nation-wide (Zimbabwe Government 1994).

Within the organisational structures and processes of the educational institutions themselves, gender plays a much larger role than is often realised. Indeed, until recently when women began to speak out loudly about their concerns about being marginalised, gender issues in education in the developing countries remained largely un-addressed and, therefore, unresolved. Because of the growing agitation of the issues by women, it is no longer possible for governments to ignore them. That the marginalisation

of women in educational institutions requires urgent official attention is shown in a recent United Nations report on the status of the world's women in educational organisations, which notes that women are poorly represented among policymakers and decision takers. Not surprisingly, women are increasingly dissatisfied with just the opportunity to work and have begun to demand representation at the highest levels of decision-making structures in education.

Meanwhile, society encourages men and women to behave in specific ways according to its norms and regards any deviance as inappropriate and unacceptable although, according to Gray (1989: 39), it is quite natural to be fully androgynous. Consequently, there is resentment when roles commonly held to be appropriate to one sex are assumed by members of another. This is especially true in education where some school headship positions are considered appropriate for one sex rather than the other. For instance, it is normally assumed that nursery, infant, and primary schools should have women heads, and secondary schools (including even all girls-schools) and Further Education Colleges 'should' have men heads. In Zimbabwe, for instance, only three of the country's 15 Teacher Education Colleges were headed by women as at 2003. Significantly, two of the three colleges had male Deputy Heads.

Meanwhile, there were barely any women in the top administrative structures of the country's 10 Polytechnics and 9 Universities, except for one woman who was a deputy head of a technical college. Of the country's 9 universities, only one, a Distance Education/Open University, was headed by a woman but only in an acting position. Even among full time academic staff in Further Education Colleges, women were in the minority. At the country's largest and oldest university, the University of Zimbabwe, for example, out of an academic staff complement of around 1 200 in 2003, only 120 were women and, out of these, only 20 held management positions, as documented below:

Position	Number of Positions	No. of Women in Office
Vice Chancellor	1	0
Pro-Vice Chancellor	1	0
Registrar	1	0
Executive Deans	11	2
Departmental Chairpersons	74	10
Directors of Centres/Institutes	15	5
Deans of Students	1	0
Chaplain	1	0
Wardens of Residences	11	1

As is clear from the above, women are very poorly represented in the decision making administrative structures of the University of Zimbabwe. The question that arises is why this is so.

A number of explanations have been put forward. For instance, Subbarao *et al* (1994) have argued that one of the reasons why women are under-represented in top positions in educational institutions is that fewer women than men apply for top administrative jobs. This claim is open to debate as even in countries where centralised posting is the norm, as in Britain and France, the same gender imbalances still hold (Shakeshaft 1989). The other reason is that many women have to leave work to have children and, therefore, essentially, are seen as renouncing their interest in a career. Lastly, they maintain that, because women bear the bulk of domestic responsibilities, it has generally been felt that they could not cope with the added responsibilities that would be expected of them as managers and decision-makers. Such attitudes have tended to limit women's participation in positions of power and authority, particularly in conservative societies, such as Zimbabwe, that are deeply rooted in traditional cultures (Saint 1992).

In Zimbabwe, as elsewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa, the marginalisation of women has its roots in the school system itself that has, traditionally, treated the boy child differently to the girl child. Moreover, unequal access to secondary education in much of sub-Saharan Africa and, indeed, the rest of the developing world has severely disadvantaged women in their efforts to achieve professional advancement. In addition, according to Shakeshaft (1989), the girl child is further disadvantaged by the educational system's inability to cater for their special needs in the curriculum, to enable them to build self-confidence and to raise their career aspirations.

Equal Opportunities: A Dream or a Possibility?

In Zimbabwe, as in many other developing and developed countries, there are no longer any legal barriers to equality in the teaching profession. Before independence in 1980, black women came fourth in a hierarchy in educational employment privileges in which white, Asian, coloured and black male counterparts enjoyed better employment terms over white, Asian and coloured female counterparts, and black male counterparts, respectively. At independence, the incoming Zimbabwe government immediately established policies to redress these inequalities. Obviously, not enough was done, as recent demands by women for equal opportunities in the educational sector, reflected in the Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training Report (1999: 173), reveal. The problem that continues to challenge policy-makers in Zimbabwe and elsewhere is how to develop an education service that is free from bias, stereotyping, and discrimination in the face of deeply ingrained cultural and religious attitudes.

It also stands to reason that men are not about to give up their privileges for the sake of high sounding ideals. Where there is a semblance of equal opportunity, as dictated by either affirmative action or the quota system, men continue to assume greater responsibility for the things that matter. In Zimbabwe, for instance, national educational policies, including issues relating to the curriculum and examinations, continue to be determined by men, while women are normally assigned to counselling, hospitality, and support services which are 'more in keeping with their feminine nature' (Davies 1990). Such allocations can only lead to a spiral of under-evaluation where women are not afforded a chance to demonstrate administrative competence and where men's 'natural' leadership ability is given prominence. Thus, according to Cockburn (1991), educational management remains, in men's minds, a male hierarchy with women in it. Happily for men, the *status quo* where men continue to hold onto their positions is retained.

Where this has been allowed to erode slightly, for example in the secondary schools in Zimbabwe, it has only been assisted by the fact that recruitment and promotion decisions are always made two or three steps above the grade at which the appointment is to be made. It is these 'bigger' men, whose own positions are not threatened who, if necessity compels them, will make the decision to appoint some women colleagues to influential positions. This perhaps explains why in Zimbabwe, in the Higher Education Management Structure, there are very few women occupying any meaningful positions. For example, according to the figures issued by the National Council for the Ministry of Higher Education and Technology 2000, the Minister of Higher Education, his Deputy and two of the four Under-Secretaries for Higher Education are men. There is, at 2003, no woman Regional or Deputy Regional Director of Education. Of the three Directors of Higher Education, only one is a woman; of the Eight Deputy Directors of Higher Education, only one is a woman; and of all the officers holding administrative positions at Head Office, only 7% are women. Thus, it appears, the equality policy agenda stated in the Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education and Training Report (1999: 137), which states that "Zimbabwe . . . upholds equity in the enjoyment of rights to both men and women including participation in education" might be a hollow claim on the part of the authorities.

Male Attitudes and Reactions

The statement that 'a master should not serve under a mistress' (Oram in Acher (1989), continues to hold true in educational management, for attempts in Zimbabwe to introduce equal opportunities for all have met with resistance from men. What this shows is that women should not expect men to relinquish their privileged positions voluntarily. As Oram (1989)

notes, often, men resent women's advances. This resentment manifests itself in a number of forms. For instance, women have found some of their male subordinates unwilling to accept their authority, with some, suddenly becoming awkward, or worse still, creating undercurrents that undermine the authority of women in positions of management. Very successful women are often made targets of hostile comments. When a successful woman makes a mistake, fails, or has a setback, Phillips (1987) remarks that there is much celebration.

Men, it has also been observed, readily refer to the highest ranking women as 'tokens', supposing that they are in their position, not because they are competent, but because they are 'equity flagships' (Cockburn 1991: 66). Often, it has been charged that successful women got to where they are by 'fluttering their eyelashes' at male superiors (Spencer *et al* 1987: 43). Such attitudes are indeed a cause for concern and efforts must be made to weed them out.

A Case for Women

Gender considerations in school management should be taken more seriously as the selection of one head over another may have far-reaching implications for both the school and children, whether male or female. One such consideration should be the need for gender balance in management. If all children are to be taught in an environment and atmosphere that encourages them to grow up and develop in what Gray (1989) calls 'that common psychological androgyny that all children share ...,' then the policies of management must reflect the pluralistic composition of society.

In fact, the gender perspective allows us to take a more creative view of the management role, for, if schools are to be viewed as 'nurturing' institutions (Gray 1989), where children receive support, understanding, and encouragement, then they require a form of management that is gender balanced. Davies (1990) suggests why a more feminine style of management may be more appropriate for schools. She claims that feminine styles of management, which more often than not include gentility, nurturing, and understanding qualities, are more accepting of differences than male styles. Female styles, it is further argued, are also more tolerant of deviance, thus allowing room for personal growth and the natural development of children. Cockburn (1991) argues further in favour of women in managerial positions by stating that women are especially competent, diligent, industrious, and practical and would therefore make better managers because, ironically, their experience of running households, a role that has previously often been seen as standing in the way of many a woman's career, is actually an asset in terms of managerial skills.

Another point made in favour of women is that it is in the interest of girls for women to hold high office in educational institutions. It is also in the

interest of balanced education as a whole for both sexes to manage education. Recent studies in Uganda, Nigeria, and Swaziland on specific institutional initiatives for women in education appear to have produced a positive impact on women's participation at all levels.

More to the point, gender analysis within educational management theory or practice should not be about identifying fundamental sex differences in administration. It should not be about providing females access to male dominated or male defined occupational hierarchies, either. A nation's best potential minds, regardless of gender, should be given the opportunity for full development. The argument should, in fact, be about identifying what both male and female administrators can bring to education. The argument should really be about a management ethos that is not based on gender, but on the total individual and his/her potential. For management in education, as indeed anywhere else, has nothing to do with the sex of the incumbent, but the capabilities and characteristics of the individual, male or female. To take the argument even further, women should not be made to feel that they are fighting to join a predominantly male hierarchy. The issue here is that of an ill-suited educational management framework that acts to exclude women from decision-making. It is this structure, contends Davies (1990: 78), that all concerned must turn their attention to and not 'attempt to change women into surrogate men'.

Strategies for Change

In the meantime, however, while men might want to ponder over a system which has, for long, allowed them more and better opportunities than women, women, on their part, would do well to rally behind one another and struggle to 'tip the hurdles' (Gunter 1992: 19) in their favour and alter the social contracts that have for so long held them back. Thus, the new agenda for change can only be 're-written by women in their own hand' (Cockburn 1991: 63) and it is only they who can ensure that the fight for equal rights moves from being a mere addendum to oratory, by the powers that be, to reality.

Strategies for genuine opportunities, and not the mere inclusion of females in decision making, ought to be considered seriously under three main categories, namely, positive discrimination or forceful legislation, training, and institutional development. In the first category, apart from the legislation and the quota system that are already in operation in most developing countries, women, together with other concerned parties, need to guard against a more sinister discrimination which seeks to discriminate one woman against another. An example of this would be where, during an interview, women are subjected to discriminatory questions related to their gender, for instance, questions related to marital status, the likelihood of

maternity, and ages of their children. Women need to be aware that they can and should register their objection during interviews, regardless of the fact that they may prejudice their chances because a registered objection adds weight to the women's campaign to be taken seriously.

The second area to tackle is that of training. Efforts should be directed at both the women themselves and selection boards. Davies (1990) and Dorsey, Gaidzanwa and Mupawose (1989) suggest that women should be encouraged to attend professional development courses, which are extremely useful for their struggle. In the past, women have felt unable to attend because training is, more often than not, conducted away from work places, thus, they missed out on the benefits of professional development training, including confidence building and self-socialisation aspects, which help develop a feeling of power and confidence in the training participants.

As for the selection boards, re-orientation in the form of the type of questions asked at an interview, the composition of the interviewing panels, and a re-assessment of the idea of career profiles needs to be carried out, particularly since, for a number of reasons beyond their control, most women do not have unbroken service records. Already on the continent, efforts to expand the number of women managers in African universities have received support from a recent initiative coordinated by the Association of Commonwealth Universities and the Commonwealth Secretariat. The initiative seeks to provide a range of professional training and support services to women occupying administrative positions in Commonwealth universities. As this small group of women is assisted in their professional advancement, it is hoped that they will be able to dismantle the various barriers that now impede women's access to managerial positions within higher education institutions (World Bank Papers 1994).

The third strategy for genuine equal opportunities in educational administration derives from within the institutions of higher learning themselves. Mckenna (1992) suggests that women should be encouraged to become more assertive and refuse to accept their subordination as inevitable. Both Cockburn (1991) and Spendiff (1992) remind women not to expect men to relinquish their privileged position voluntarily, but for them to, where possible, assume an extra-ordinary degree of responsibility and initiative so that it becomes impossible not to notice their talent. For the present, it is lamentable that women everywhere have to work twice as hard as their male counterparts in order to achieve the same level of recognition. This is all the more reason why women professionals should invest their energy in combating these in-built disadvantages that they have to face in the field of education administration and elsewhere.

Colleges and universities could also be asked to produce an action plan in relation to gender equality. This would compel the relevant authorities to confront the gender issue more than they do currently. Yet another

obvious strategy for change is raising the people's awareness of gender issues and the need to strive for gender equality in all sectors of life. The cry for equal opportunities must, therefore, be taken beyond the college walls and staffing offices, to the society at large.

Finally, ensuring that all educational institutions take steps to promote equal opportunities will strengthen the chances of developing an educational system that is free from bias and gender discrimination.

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