The influence of cultural African traditions and power relations on senior women leaders in education district offices

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Abstract

In this paper, we focus on the understudied topic of women's leadership in education district offices. Despite government legislation, women are still under-represented in senior leadership positions in education. They are confronted with discriminatory power relations and insubordination that impacts their leadership. We used a qualitative methodology and African feminist theory to frame the study. Two important themes emerged from the analysis of the data: both cultural African traditions and power relations impact women negatively. We also learned that the women experienced respect and cooperation from colleagues (particularly males) given relationships forged while holding previous leadership roles. Their ability to reflect on past experiences contributed significantly to their self-confidence and to their feeling successful in their new posts.

Keywords: leadership, patriarchy, gender equity, discrimination, power relations, feminism

Introduction and background

In this paper, we examine the experiences of female leaders in education district offices as district directors and executive district management team (EDMT) members. Research reveals that education districts are pivotal in influencing school success and ensuring that all learners have high-quality education (Moorosi & Bantwini 2016). District positions consist of office-based officials, curriculum facilitators and administrators in the various finance departments, and those concerned with human resources, curriculum, examinations,

infrastructure, and support (Department of Basic Education 2013). Gender inequality permeates all levels of government, including the Ministry of Education and, more specifically, education district offices as the Gender Equity Task Team (1997) pointed out. Despite government-mandated gender requirements of 50% of females in education district office posts (Department of Basic Education 2013), the dominance of men in district office positions restricts women's entry into these leadership positions (Moorosi & Bantwini 2016). Our interest in such a study is predicated on the fact that the Gauteng Education District has appointed only 23 female district directors of the 85 school districts it manages. While globally the scarcity of female district officers is not unique, we are interested in learning about the unique atypical factors that contribute to the disparity unique to South Africa. Even in the Western hemisphere, according to Glass (2000), women (known as superintendents) in the education district offices, remain underrepresented (Parker et al. 2015). The United Nations identified gender equality and female empowerment as sustainable development goals (SDGs) for 2030. The disproportionate dearth of women in high-level administrative roles (including in South Africa) supports the need to understand the challenges for women in district leadership roles.

Context of the study

Education district offices offer crucial lines of communication to all educational institutions in their care. A renewed global interest in studying the impact of district management and offices adds to the importance of our study (Bantwini 2015). District offices must work collaboratively with principals and other educators to achieve positive student learning and achievement outcomes, deliver a quality and relevant curriculum, and ensure equitable learning opportunities for all children (Department of Basic Education 2013). The district also assists in policy implementation, leads and manages change, creates and enables an environment for schools to operate effectively, intervenes in underperforming schools, and offers administrative and professional services to schools, principals, and teachers (Roberts 2011). These responsibilities are significant to the effective leading and managing of schools in any district. Scholars in education stress that effective district leadership is vital to the success of schools (Leithwood et al. 2014).

We are interested in women's experiences in district office leadership because we believe, as do other scholars (Leithwood et al. 2014), that hiring women in educational administration is essential to addressing gender equity. No significant evidence suggests that women are less impactful than men in leadership roles, nor do men and women differ in innate leadership effectiveness (Brunner 2018). Many women strivings for these district positions have survived and surpassed challenges in the lower levels of school leadership (e.g., as deputy principals and principals) and, thus, have developed the resilience, assertiveness, and grit that they bring to these more elite positions. Women hired to solve a crisis (even when they have been set up to fail as in what is known as the glass cliff situation) often gain valuable and meaningful experience. McKinsey and Co. (2009) claimed from their research that women adopt leadership behaviours that allow them to navigate crises more effectively than do men. Diaz (2023) stated that women become more empathetic and emotionally intelligent and

foster high engagement, inclusivity, trust, and leadership behaviours that disrupt how organisations have been managed historically, thus yielding positive organisational and even economically improved results.

Objective of the study

Our work in this area distinguishes itself by studying women's experiences in a specific South African district context. Here, we highlight the factors related to the challenges women experience in these roles. The result of such research can provide more transparency for women and other stakeholders and policymakers if they understand which institutional changes can be made to assist women in achieving and maintaining these roles.

Significance and rationale for the study

The literature on the district office in South Africa supports the idea that effective leadership is paramount to running schools effectively. Schools in the Gauteng Province lie in 15 districts, and a head office oversees all district offices (Department of Basic Education 2011). Of the 2,558 senior-level staff members (chief directors, directors, deputy directors, cluster leaders or IDSO, circuit managers and branch managers) in the region of Gauteng, 1,587 are men, with 971 female managers a ratio of 5:3 (Gauteng Department of Education 2015). The Constitution (Republic of South Africa 1996), in conjunction with the Employment Equity Act (Republic of South Africa 1998), aims to guarantee equal opportunities to all citizens. Furthermore, since the advent of this Equity Act, every Provincial Education Department has been obliged to fill newly vacant positions with women (see Republic of South Africa 1998b). However, it could take the government many years to realise this goal. This is the first of many steps to recruit more women to leadership and managerial positions (Gender Equity Task Team, 1997).

Research question

Extensive studies on the experiences and challenges of women in leadership in schools exist (Moorosi 2010; Schmidt & Mestry 2014). Still, research regarding women in leadership posts in education district offices is limited. Our objective is to examine women's experiences and address the following research question: "What are the challenges that women experience in the district offices?"

Literature review

Achieving a leadership role as a woman is a significant milestone. Once they have been hired, women often find themselves confronted with obstacles in the workplace, such as being stereotyped, and having to face sexist practices and discrimination (Schmidt & Mestry 2014); the lack of professional and organisational support, mentoring, or networking (Moorosi 2010); experiencing power struggles leading to feelings of disempowerment, marginalisation, and isolation (Schmidt & Mestry 2015); and facing perceptions of women leaders that result in their having their authority challenged (Shah 2021). In this paper, using

a post-structuralist African feminist theoretical perspective, we offer a unique study of women's leadership experiences in South Africa in the globally understudied context of district offices. We argue that traditional views about gender and workplace expectations among men and women play complex roles in shaping women's experiences in district leadership, particularly in developing countries such as South Africa. Women are far removed from a barrier-free environment when they are competing for leadership roles, primarily because of gendered stereotypes, cultural beliefs, and workplace expectations. Although many women work in education, there is a disproportionately low representation of them in district leadership positions (Lerma 2020). Archaic sexist attitudes continue to act as crucial drawbacks to women's progress. Women often experience insubordination from male or female staff who refuse to accept their legitimate authority (Oyeniran & Lili 2020). Of the chief executive officer positions, only 4.4 per cent of them are held by women. Government interventions (Department of Basic Education 2013; Gauteng Department Education 2012) have not been proven successful in remedying these problems, and the lack of policy support is evident even at the district level (Department of Basic Education 2014).

African traditions make it difficult for women to advance

While raising an argument that African cultural traditions play a significant role in making it difficult for women to break through patriarchy's glass ceiling might appear to be a sweeping generalisation, it is a highly relevant factor in developing countries like South Africa, with its controversial history and cultural traditions that define women's roles. While it is not our intent in this paper to elaborate on this history in detail, we feel it is important to highlight that historically and very generally, South African society across all races has been very patriarchal in prioritising the needs of men over women. Historically, women were owned by their fathers, male relatives, and husbands. They had no rights to land or property or to the custody of their children. Polygamy and violence against women and girls were standard practices during apartheid. Labour and employment were gendered. Women of colour who worked in domestic labour jobs had no job security, were paid little, lacked support from husbands, and were abused by employers and the law (Lenser 2019).

South Africa's history has resulted in shaping women's identities such that from youth they have been taught to accept without challenge that they are inferior to men and their place is in the home, while men can commit fully to their work. Women, therefore, start at a disadvantage (Bay 2019). This unequal treatment, inherent to practices in the home, has found its way into male leadership-dominated organisations, consistently disadvantaging women. In addition, the work at home done by women including their family and domestic duties for which they receive little support, often overburdens them and can affect their performance in senior leadership roles. Policy development is not enough to root out the deep-seated gendered cultural traditions. In addition, even with the necessary educational leadership qualifications, women do not always feel prepared enough nor believe that they have the skills to succeed at the level of school boards (Chen 2014). Female leaders may also feel that their knowledge of community and curriculum is inadequate.

In African culture, women are generally discouraged from being leaders in the community (Musau 2019). Given women's home and child-bearing responsibilities, their career paths are interrupted much more often than are those of their male counterparts. In many cases, women are appointed to leadership positions before pursuing a qualification in management or only after much encouragement from a mentor (Moorosi 2010; Schmidt & Mestry 2014). Women who take on leadership positions often relinquish these posts because of the obstacles they encounter (Morganroth et al. 2020). Gender stereotypes lead to perceptions that women are poor performers who lack assertiveness when, in fact, women present different and differing approaches to leadership (Hillet al. 2016). The lack of opportunities and appropriate role models propagate the perception that women are less career-oriented and less ambitious (Warrell 2020).

Workplace discrimination, insubordination, and resistance because of power struggles

In district offices, women face formidable hurdles of power-play manoeuvres and overt discrimination like resistance and insubordination (Bodalina 2019). Discrimination at work may lead to a lack of interest in education district officers who recruit women for leadership positions since men often perpetuate antagonism and negativity long before women take up their positions (Fregni 2021). Another discriminating factor is the androcentrism that is endemic to organisations globally since this is a hierarchical legitimisation of only one way of knowing—the male way— regarding organisational structures, power, policies, and practices in the workplace (Castano et al. 2019). Women's leadership suitability is continually being assessed against male criteria and values that are assumed to be the desired norm (McKinsey & Company 2021).

Finally, policy structures tend to subordinate women (Castana et al. 2019). The former South African white government used patriarchal structures in the family to propagate messages that imbued its people with values that support such a patriarchal hierarchy in organisations and society that is geared towards dominating and subduing women. This was a result of the state's vested interest in reproducing a countrywide impression that feminism and feminist movements represent an anti-motherhood and anti-family agenda (Barrett & McIntosh 2015).

Common in organisations are overt and covert instances of discrimination that propagate that notion of essential differences between women and men that leads to women's disadvantage and through which men wield power over women. As the established norm, this gender-based power structure flourishes unchallenged in the workplace. Contemporary stereotypes are based on the belief that men are more worthy of status because they are inherently more competent than women in high-level jobs. The power relationships in the education sector takes three primary forms: mythical male dominance that denies women's status; blatant dominance; and general sexism (Dubisch 2019). Garn and Brown (2008) recommended that women enter leadership positions from an awareness that is sensitive to gender bias and power-play struggles. A firm determination and an iron will in the recognition that women must fight harder, wait longer, and survive more scrutiny to become district leaders, is essential to a helpful mindset.

Theoretical framework: African feminisms

Historically, the lives of South African women from different racial backgrounds have been shaped differently than those of women in the Western hemisphere in that they span the historical and political eras of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Africa whose histories differ from those of Europe and America. Histories are even dissimilar across African countries, so the definitions and experiences of feminism are different from region to region in Africa (Goredema 2010).

The term feminism in South Africa is contested (Lenser 2019). Many women in Africa disregard the label of feminist for different reasons but still carry out a broad feminist agenda that is viewed as activism fostering female agency and autonomy. Some view African feminism as an add-on to the advancements in the country's liberation agenda. Others reject feminism since it threatens patriarchal practices and male authority (Basu, 2018). According to Gaidzanwa (1992), it is not possible to refer to a single African feminism. Profound contradictions and African paradoxes endemic to South Africa create a unique environment for study. For example, the occurrence of an increasing number of women in leadership positions occurs at the same time as levels of rape and violence increase (Steyn 1998). Women, therefore, find themselves in ambiguous gender positionings highlighted by polarised states of empowerment and victimisation; women are seen and not seen, and they are included and excluded at the same time (Steyn 1998).

When theorizing feminisms in South Africa, we need to consider the country's cultural history that presents a very particular historical representation of the African woman as excluded in an official capacity by both her male and Western counterparts and recognise that this is crucial to our study. Goredema (2010) argued that African feminism as an epistemology poses rhetorical arguments that validate African women against the mainstream Western feminist discourse and offers different dispositions and strategies unique to Africa for liberation. Here we strive to present an argument for a feminist approach that captures women's experiences in South Africa. We believe that these women have much to share based on their unique locations and communities. The main challenge among scholars in applying feminism in South Africa is the necessity to examine how women and men interact while preserving the cultural authenticity of these relationships, as well as nurturing a female identity in both a traditional African context but also an increasingly invasive and influential global world that might define feminism differently (Goredema 2010). In addition, it is always a challenge for women to incorporate and respect traditions in a way that allows them to be empowered and not victimised. This can be done if women are vigilant and continually ask questions like, What is tradition? Who defines it? Does the use of culture have to enforce compliance, particularly regarding gendered roles?

Nnaemeka (1997) has reminded us that African feminisms are all a form of activism that fosters the transformation of a society in which women may be treated as contributing citizens in all spheres of life. The essence of a feminist stance is its ability to reveal the gaps and blank spaces in a male-dominant culture that propagates sexist behaviour. In an

examination of these spatial interstices, the voices and actions of women and other marginalised groups, who are generally excluded from Western so-called advanced knowledge, come to the fore. Perhaps the lasting message that can be conveyed is that African feminisms in our study constitute a non-Western (or geographically specific) focus on female agency and autonomy. Given the extreme heterogeneity and divisiveness of feminisms in Africa, there are some central tenets agreement that focus on culture/tradition, socio-economic and socio-political issues, and the role of men, race, and sexuality (Goredema 2010).

Research methodology

To address the research questions, the method we considered most appropriate for this exploration, following Creswell (2009), was a qualitative case study. According to Yin (2012), the case study is a suitable design choice when research addresses a descriptive question, as is the case in this study. This case study provided an in-depth exploration of women's experiences in senior leadership positions in education districts in the Gauteng Education District.

The participants in this inquiry were women in senior district leadership positions, with a sample drawn from the Gauteng East education district in which there were 184 schools and 280 district staff personnel. An essential aspect of qualitative data collection is the use of individual interviews (see Creswell 2009). The purposively selected sample included eight women in senior district leadership positions that included a chief education specialist, two circuit managers, four Institutional Development and Support (IDSO) personnel, and the district's director. For the individual interviews, women were selected based on having had at least five years of experience in leadership. In this way the sample reflected a combination of relatively newly hired and experienced district leaders. Data collected through the interviews was audio recorded and transcribed separately using Microsoft Word. We used content analysis to classify, summarise, and tabulate data in which coding played a critical role. The analysis and interpretation of data were undertaken using ATLAS.ti (8.0) (see Woolf & Silver 2017). We utilised member checking (participant validation) to explore the credibility of results. Transcripts were returned to participants to check for accuracy and completeness. Informed consent was obtained, and the anonymity of respondents was assured along with the confidentiality of the findings.

Findings

The findings in this paper revealed mixed results in that the women had both negative and positive leadership experiences in their district roles because of long-standing practices of discrimination emanating from traditional African cultural ideologies and white apartheid-based practices against women. The inclusion of positive comments is in no way meant to erase negative experiences but is, rather, meant to highlight a positive discourse about the subtleties and nuances of a leadership journey that may have started long before the participants arrived at the district office.

The findings focus on women's experiences that were impacted by socio-cultural traditions related to the patriarchal mind-set prevalent in the workplace. The positive comments and experiences are particularly encouraging, since they show positive change occurring in the district office that should be celebrated and acknowledged. In this section, we illustrate the women's challenges as district leaders by highlighting two essential themes to make sense of the data. Of the principles or categories of oppression mentioned above that focus on culture/tradition, socio-economic, and socio-political issues, the role of men, race, and sexuality (Goredema 2010), our study places primacy on two main themes: 1) cultural traditions that pose patriarchal barriers; and, relatedly, 2) power relations that undermine women's leadership.

The first theme speaks more to the cultural African tradition and men's traditional responses that influence women practice or even inhibits it. We discovered that cultural traditions pose barriers in relation to women having to prove themselves, and to the issue of women not being taken seriously.

In relation to the second theme, formal and informal power structures in the organisations in which the women worked exacerbated their negative experiences in the workplace since they experienced situations of feeling overpowered by patriarchal structures and male behaviour. Examples of this included being made to feel that the men had power over them and experiencing overt domination by their male colleagues, both of which are rooted in traditional patriarchal South African traditions. The second theme included the sub-theme of the women's resistance being experienced by the men as insubordination that led to the subjects' disempowerment.

Cultural traditions pose patriarchal barriers

Women must prove themselves.

Half the women in our study felt that they needed to prove themselves as education leaders. D1[1] believed that her gender had "disadvantaged [her] in this senior leader position." D6 felt that "females find it difficult; they always have to prove themselves." D7 described an example of the stereotypical male identity at play in saying,

> There are individuals who believe that males can do the job better than females . . .I am talking specifically about some of our Ex-Model C schools, especially the white Afrikaans males who believe they can do the job better than the females.

D8, also a new IDSO, claimed,

> I believe that if I were a male leader, it might have been different because . . . we have a male-dominated background, and from my observation, the males in the District office feel that they're the best Managers.

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[1]   These transcripts have not been edited.

The overwhelming feeling of having to prove their worth and value as female leaders was common to half the women. Women securing senior positions in the education district were still being confronted by cultural attitudes held by male district staff and school principals which meant that the message stressed that women's greatest skills are those located in the home. D7 was disappointed to learn that

> there are schools who will tell you that we need a female because of the kitchen and the washing of the toilets. They still tend to classify certain roles as more suitable for females than males. We are working in this environment wherein we are challenged.

Women are not taken seriously

A common refrain from some of the women was that they felt ignored and were not taken seriously. Stereotypical responses embedded in traditions strongly deny women's ability to serve as leaders. For example, D1 felt that starting as a new IDSO "is . . . very difficult. . . I must say the group of principals are not cooperative. The occurrence and frequency of mild stereotypical intimations in the Gauteng East Education District were nuanced but noticeable to D2, who explained,

> Look, I've got 35 principals as a circuit manager, but of the 35, I can confidently say I have discomforts with about five out of 35. The five are the ones that I feel they don't receive me well, they don't really take heed of my instructions, and they don't take me seriously. I can also attach a reason . . . it's because I'm female. . . We still have more of a patriarchal society out there. Most of our stakeholders are male . . . you will always feel that resistance that says a woman cannot tell me what to do.

D8 commented,

> Male principals, that stereotype . . . won't react promptly to what you're saying. Sometimes you supervise giving them instructions, but then they brush it aside and say 'ok, I will do it.'

D1 felt that the overt racial and gender discrimination directed against her by her principal stemmed from what she believed had been rooted in his traditional religious and cultural ideologies in which women are subservient. She said,

> I have only one principal that is uncomfortable with the fact that I am a female. It could also be cultural or religious backgrounds. I have a Muslim principal who feels it's better to work with a male. This is also evident in how he runs his school. He listens more to the input of the male teachers in meetings than from females. In that particular case, we are at all times at loggerheads with one another. He will not take instructions from me, even from my senior, who is also a female.

Power relations undermine women's leadership

Power-play scenarios in the district among senior leaders and among district officials and school staff were prevalent. Evidence of a power over process by men revealed some oppressive sub-themes. Women leaders continue to face discrimination challenges at district offices, such as resistance and insubordination.

Resistance from principals and stakeholders leads to disempowerment

Cultural practices and norms rooted in power challenged less than half of the women in relation to performing their professional duties. D3's experience as an IDSO garnered neutral reactions except for one male teacher who resisted her authority. She said,

> I've never experienced any hostility, any resistance because I'm a female . . . (but) there was one teacher who even left the institution after I was appointed; that person just felt he cannot be under the leadership of a woman.

The resistance from male principals and stakeholders was sometimes presented in other forms, such as overt recruitment dysfunction. D1 noticed that men's resistance promoted what she described as a male cultural agenda in schools that resulted in unfair labour practices. This resistance could be quite glaring as she went on to explain,

> If you are looking at some of our schools where, for example, we've had deputy principal posts advertised, and we had HODs that were male and female, you would find that some members of the SGB and members of the union still believe that a male can basically run a school.

The male/female power struggle was active in most districts. D5 shared an explicit example of the hierarchical order in her own district office when she said,

> . . . sometimes I do feel especially (disadvantaged) when I work with stakeholders; we still have more of a patriarchal society out there. Most of our stakeholders are male and some of the principals that I worked with even when I was still a cluster leader . . . you will always feel that resistance that says a woman cannot tell me what to do.

Insubordination against women

A challenge for over half the women who ascended to senior positions was that patriarchal traditions resulted in insubordinate behaviour in response to their leadership. Such disrespect resulted in disobedience and led to power struggles between subordinates and supervisors. The following responses reflected this type of insubordination. D4 felt a negative undercurrent with individual principals towards her as the head of the district. She explained,

> It's not necessarily like responding, but you can read the mode of the (principals) meeting. The male principals sometimes tend to undermine me, not respecting the office that I occupy, in a way, belittling the position I hold.

D8 found that men under her authority were guilty of insubordination and attempted to derail the leadership process. She said,

> I only have one male principal, whom I'm working with. I don't know. Maybe he's still on the old dispensation. He will ignore my instructions, blatantly disregards them . . . when I have a one-on-one reaction, he will not be seen as a person who's keen or listens to me . . . It's just like that. He can't be taught by a woman on what to do. It is one of the old challenges.

Women in senior positions often worked in a male-dominated environment within an overarching androcentric culture that led to a sense of male superiority in a sacred male club. Male supremacy among IDSOs was prevalent in the education district senior leadership, as D5 recollected,

> [When]I became a circuit manager, I could see the attitude of IDSOs . . . I could feel (they say) what does she know? She hasn't been an IDSO! . . . especially with the male IDSOs . . . because I was a female, and I was a senior, I was entering this 'sacred' space of IDSOs.

D4, the district director, spoke about her concerns during principals' meetings, executive district management team (EDMT) meetings, and her interactions with other male district directors in saying,

> You would notice also in our principals' meeting . . . some Principals particularly the males they have rude attitudes . . . they find it time wasting because they have to listen to a female district director.

D5 echoed these sentiments in commenting,

> I only have two male IDSOs and one female IDSO. And you will find that most of the males are not that cooperative and therefore, I work more closely with the female IDSO.

Respect comes after some experience

Most of the women revealed an interesting trend in that they felt that they gained respect with experience. Some of these same women still shared examples of experiencing insubordination and resistance from isolated male colleagues while three women (D1, D3, D8) had only negative experiences in their roles in the District Office.

In terms of gaining the respect of their male colleagues, D2 noted that since she was a long-serving senior leader in her district, those she supervised were accustomed to her as a woman in that leadership role. In these rarer cases, the reaction from male principals toward the Director, IDSOs, and circuit managers was both respectful and professional. The district director, D4, claimed, "My principals are giving me a very good response. Principals are giving me support, both males and females, you know!" The circuit manager, D5,

commented on an encouraging, professional spirit among both male and female subordinates. She averred that "overall in my circuit, there is definitely no problem with both male and female principals. There's that mutual respect." As D8 grew into her position, the men became more cooperative, She said,

> I must say that funny enough the gentleman that's working there listens more to me than the females do. I get a more supportive and advisory role from him, and that contributed a lot to my understanding of HR issues at schools.

D6 highlighted some of the progress being made when she noted,

> . . . with regard to all the changes in management issues I think people don't see you now as a female but see you as a competent person. Once you can prove that to them then the issue of you being a female takes a step backwards, I would say.

These positive experiences may be because of the fact that these women had already secured leadership posts prior to working in the District office and, in D6's case, gained respect in previous roles. For her,

> There are very supportive male colleagues. I think it's because of the relationship we share and the number of years we've grown together with one another in this organisation.

Finally, D7 conveyed that she experienced no negative reaction to her appointment as a women leader and she attributed this to the fact that when she was appointed there were already many women in higher positions and the district director was also a woman. She felt that the South African constitution was having an impact on gender equality. She explained,

> I think because we have come so far in terms of our constitution particularly in South Africa and in education. The challenges that one would have anticipated were actually not there. More so, I think because when I was appointed, we had a female as a district director and we had a lot of females in the higher positions. So, there wasn't a stage where you felt you were looked down upon or people felt that you were unable to actually run the role. There wasn't a male that I could say that would look down on you or thought that you didn't have the capabilities to actually run with the post.

Discussion

The findings of this study were heartening since we received a mix of negative and positive experiences from our participants. Yet, the extent to which gaining leadership at the district level has any correlation with some of the positive responses remains unclear. Some of the women may not be new to educational leadership, having had an opportunity to learn from past challenges and develop strategies to navigate new ones, as well as establish respectful and professional relationships with male colleagues before arriving at the District Office.

The ground-breaking argument we make in this paper is that women continue to face obstacles in leadership that men do not: they are judged and criticised by their male counterparts even after being appointed; they experience resistance and insubordination in a work setting; and are embroiled in power scenarios that go beyond the norm for any organisation. Policy efforts are a starting point to remedying the situation. For example, while the Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality (WEGE) Bill of 2013 (Republic of South Africa 2013) does not counter patriarchal practices, it does promote women's empowerment in the workplace. Despite this, the representation of women in top positions in the education community is still low since most South African women choose not to follow a path to leadership roles. The Constitution and the Employment of Equity Act promote equal opportunity and equality but do not address the sexist stereotypes to which they are subjected and the subtle practices of discrimination suffered by women in the workplace and at home (Moorosi 2010).

Our findings reveal historically accepted practices of discrimination and opposition towards women's advancement emanate from traditional African cultural ideologies and colonial apartheid practices. Patriarchy and its deeply rooted traditions affect the performance of these women leaders (Moorosi 2010). Their work, social, political, and home domains are engulfed by the power of the men at the helm (Brod 2018). Furthermore, when more men than women are in an androcentric workplace culture, women face challenges in implementing their leadership; they must prove themselves as education leaders and are continually being measured against male behavioural attributes (Appelbaum et al., 2003). While male dominance in South Africa is decreasing, the fundamental attitudes toward women remain deep-seated, but we see signs that these practices and attitudes are not resistant to change. The district office's reactions toward senior women leaders were diverse, contradictory, and, in some cases, optimistic.

Our study revealed several situations of male power and domination over women that resulted in disrespect and insubordination. This gendered power still flourishes in the workplace and remains largely unchallenged. Noncompliance includes men ignoring instructions and directions from a woman leader as they challenge her authority. Sometimes, subtle messages are sent to the women that convey the old patriarchal dogma of male supremacy. Men displayed superiority over women in their responses and actions, by, for example, not cooperating or listening. Post-structuralist African feminist theory helps us to recognise how conflict operates in district hierarchical structures and how people experience it across gender and race (Carrim & Nkomo 2016). Women are often subjected to insubordination from men who continue to challenge their authority (Faulkner 2015). Feminists view the consequence of male superiority over women's supposed inferiority as violence against women. This view is supported by African history.

The power play and power relations in the district office are often a result of men having dominance at home. Newly homologated laws governing districts can, at least potentially, mitigate the effects of men's power over women (Department of Basic Education 2018). If ignored and not addressed (by the women's agency or by policy intervention), men's

insubordination and lack of respect towards women can lead to a wide range of problems and a complete derailment of systems and processes that maintain the district as a functional and effective organisation (Faulkner 2015). The male superiority complex can reach mythical heights (Halford & Leonard 2001). Exacerbating this problem is that men dominate the recruitment structures, and the effect of such dominance causes appointment selections to occur according to the traditional and culturally gendered division of roles. School policy changes are needed in education districts to address these disparities (Carrim & Nkomo 2016). Male IDSOs often present organisational possessiveness over their schools and prefer maintaining their territorial authority, creating much tension in the process. This territorial dominance is among the challenges faced by female leaders.

At the same time, these power struggles between senior leaders in the district office provide an opportunity for women senior leaders to address the situation. For example, one district director in our study expressed her disappointment at the male officials who refused to cooperate, yet while maintaining a professional perception of remaining firm, she still valued the men; she said, "There was a lot to be gained from the males, but the approach is still to be firm [with them]." Such reflection requires emotional intelligence and illustrates attempts at honouring tradition but finding ways of not being compliant.

Research reveals that women who break through the proverbial glass ceiling and make it to the topmost hierarchical structures of the education district tend to exhibit grit throughout their careers. They must overcome society's false perception that they lack the resilience to face hard and challenging situations (Uwizeyimana et al. 2014). Against all odds, they must keep bouncing back from adversity to demonstrate optimism, determination, and commitment in all their roles as teachers, HODs, principals, IDSOs, circuit managers, deputy district directors, and district directors. African feminists aim to find solutions to mitigate organisations' experiences of patriarchy while supporting cultural diversity. They find solutions in using values such as cooperation that characterise non-violence as part of their natural ethics-based dynamics (Qureshi 2015). Thus, the value of assertiveness and adherence to policy demands and traditional positive female values can work to salvage their compromised positions. Feminist theories offer the opportunity to explore ways in which women can negotiate their challenges using agency and resilience.

Conclusion

An African feminist approach grounded this study in its exploration of the challenges female district officers experience in the District Office. The findings reveal that historical and cultural traditions exacerbate workplace dynamics. Power and domination over women can disrupt organisational harmony between men and women. Discrimination against women leaders and employing stereotyping in androcentric district offices can take away from the leadership contributions women can make. Gender stereotyping often leads to resistance from subordinates, disrespect, and insubordination. The women worked harder than their male counterparts so work-related challenges became the norm. Stereotyping, cultural norms, and power relations posed difficulties. Given patriarchal ways of thinking, conflicts with peers

became a natural occurrence in day-to-day encounters. The rarer positive experiences women had occurred when women gained experience and thus earned the respect of those they supervised.

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