GENDER AND LEADERSHIP: FACTORS INFLUENCING ELECTION INTO STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE COUNCIL AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The under-representation of women in leadership positions is symptomatic of every known society, and this is a matter of concern, at least when considered in the context of the equal opportunities discourse and sustainable development. The present study investigated the influence of gender on access to leadership positions in the Student Representative Council (SRC) among final year student teachers at a college in the Harare province of Zimbabwe. Ninety students (50 male, 40 female) participated in the survey. An open-ended questionnaire was used to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. The results suggest that students have gendered perceptions towards particular SRC positions. Thus, a male student was more likely to be elected to the position of SRC president or secretary general, while a female student was more likely to be elected to the position of catering officer or treasurer. The implications of the research findings for sustainable development are discussed. The study concludes that, gender deconstruction is not only desirable, but feasible. The paper makes recommendations aimed essentially at furthering the discourse on equal opportunities, with its perceived multiplier effects on sustainable development.

Key words: gender; leadership; Student Representative Council; sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

Even in the new millennium, leadership remains a gendered social phenomenon in virtually every known society (Kastener, Woode & Hinson, 2005; Kornblum, 2008; Macionis & Plummer, 2008;

Mayekiso, 2004; Mivanyi, 2004; Suffla, 2004). Although in the last couple of decades Zimbabwean women appear to have gradually started to gain access to leadership positions in the various institutions of society, it can hardly be disputed that much more still need to be done. The role that socialisation agents such the family, education, peer group and mass media play in determining one's future roles in society has been acknowledged and well documented (Cole & Cole, 2001; Kornblum, 2008; Runhare, 2003).

However, findings from previous Zimbabwean studies on gender and leadership remain inconclusive. For instance, Shizha (2000) found that regardless of one's gender, any primary school pupil can become a leader as long as the pupil has qualities acceptable to the class and the teacher. The same author also found that leadership positions for the class or group were fluid and flexible, and that gender was not a determinant factor. However, Shizha's (2000) findings are at variance with those of Gordon (1995a) who found that boys in Zimbabwean secondary schools tended to dominate their female counterparts. Perhaps, such a discrepancy can be attributed to the fact that by the time boys reach secondary level of education, they will have acquired their masculine mystique.

In another study, Dorsey (1989) deplored women's poor levels of participation in university governance. With reference to the University of Zimbabwe, the same author strongly argued that women were under-represented in decision-making bodies within the university structures. The under-representation of Zimbabwean women in leadership positions has also been evident in local schools. Although more female teachers were being elevated to the post of school head, the number of female school heads remained by far less than that of male school heads (Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture & UNICEF, 2000). This observation is supported by Nyoni's (2004) assertion that males controlled dominant positions in the educational institutions. The foregoing observations attest to the fact that Zimbabwean men continue to lead both in the home and in the world of work. However, Kaziboni (2002) found that the availability of gender education in the country led Zimbabwean women to believe that they had penetrated all decision-making positions at home, work, in the community, and even in government where they are now represented by other women.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Liberal feminists attribute unequal opportunities between males and females to socialisation (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004; Kornblum, 2008; Walby, 2005). Gender role socialisation begins early in the family and is perpetuated and reinforced by other socialisation agents that include the peer group, media and particularly education. Dorsey (1989, p.362) argues that, "Early socialisation into appropriate gender roles ensures that there is a broad general consensus within society about beliefs in gender differences." By and large, men are perceived as stronger, more aggressive, autonomous, adventurous and with good leadership qualities, while women are seen as being weaker, submissive, non-aggressive and more concerned with affiliation, nurturance and deference (Dorsey, 1989; Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture & UNICEF, 2000; Peterson & Runyan, 1999). Gender role socialisation may lead to lack of confidence, lack of courage, low self-esteem and even indecision in women (Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture & UNICEF, 2000). It can also be a hindrance to women's motivation to strive and succeed because achievement is aggressive and therefore masculine (Dorsey, 1989).

In schools, the views of parents, teachers, and in some cases even boys, suggest that boys are more intelligent and academically able and physically stronger than girls (Shizha, 2000). Thus, rather than challenging gender inequalities, schools tended to perpetuate them by constructing, defining, reinforcing and in some instances, glorifying male supremacy (Korda, 1972).

It is on the basis of the foregoing argument that, radical feminists strongly argue that access to education may not necessarily be the panacea to the marginalisation of women in society. To them, the fundamental issue is the eradication of the patriarchal nature of society (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004; Macionis & Plummer, 2008). This line of thinking is supported by Runhare (2003) who argues that even highly educated women have to contend with gender inequalities. Although the foregoing view is corroborated by Dorsey's (1989) findings in a study at the University of Zimbabwe, it is at variance with the view of Kaziboni (2002) who found that access to education tremendously transformed the status of Zibabwean women.

To Marxist feminists, women's under-representation in leadership positions in society can be attributed to their inability to participate in the public sphere. Women tended to be invisible in influential areas of life such as politics, education, industry and commerce, the mass media etc (Acker, 1987; Nna Nyenke,

2004; Radford, 1998). According to this theory, the province of women remains the private sphere, that is, the home, which in most cases is under the leadership of men.

The goal of the study therefore was to determine the applicability of the aforementioned theoretical views to the discourse on gender disparities in Zimbabwe. The major specific aim of the study was to investigate male and female student teachers' access to leadership positions in the SRC and the implications this is likely to have on sustainable development.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Three key research questions guided the current study, viz:

1. What do students consider when they elect fellow students to take up positions in the SRC?
2. Which SRC leadership positions do students regard to be suitable for male or female students, and why?
3. Which SRC positions can be taken up by both sexes, and why?

METHODOLOGY

A survey research design was chosen for this study since it enabled a wide range of data to be collected and generalised to the target population (Dooley, 1995; Sarantakos, 2005). The design enabled the collection of data from a cross-section of students. The population of the study comprised 453 final year student teachers (265 male and 188 female). To ensure equal representation of the two respective groups, the stratified random sampling procedure was used to select a sample of 90 participants (50 male and 40 female). The sample size (19.8 %) is above the 10 % recommended for survey research (Gay, 1980).

The main research instrument for the study was a questionnaire. Open-ended questions were preferred as they allowed conclusions to be made about respondents' way of thinking (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. The researcher personally administered the questionnaires, and this facilitated a 100 % return rate (Cohen & Manion, 1994). Before distributing the questionnaires, the researcher sought for the respondents' informed consent (Sarantakos, 2005). In an effort to ensure reliability and validity of the questionnaire, instructions were read and explained to the respondents.

RESULTS

Criteria for Selection into Various Positions

The students were asked to indicate the criteria they used for electing the office bearers for the following positions: SRC members (in general), SRC president, secretary general, treasurer, entertainment officer, catering officer and sports officer.

Criteria for Electing SRC Members

First the researcher sought to establish what criteria the students used to elect people to sit as members of the SRC. The idea of the question was to try and establish whether gender played a part in this regard. The results however show that both male and female students tended to share the same views, which were in the main, gender neutral. Their views were, thus, not gender disaggregated. Nevertheless, as will be shown in the next few paragraphs, when it came to election to specific positions in the SRC, the criteria that students used for this purpose, tended to vary depending on the specific positions that needed filling.

Criteria for Electing SRC President

For this position, both male and female respondents said that they considered the following attributes:

- Maturity, courage and high reasoning capacity
- Confidence and ability to stand for the people
- Good leadership qualities
- Good communication skills
- Sound public relations
- Good behaviour and moral values
- Intelligence and bravery
- Familiarity with current affairs
- Concern for fellow students

Criteria for Electing Secretary General

Respondents indicated that they would support a person who:

- Speaks boldly and firmly

- Presents facts clearly and is analytical

- Can address sensitive issues with confidence, not a coward

- Possesses good interpersonal relations

- Is outspoken, intelligent and well behaved

- Can carry out duties efficiently

Criteria for Electing Treasurer

The views of both male and female respondents fell into three distinct categories as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Criteria for Choosing Treasurer

Attribute/Criterion	Male responses	Percentage	Female responses	Percentage
Honest/Trustworthy	21	42	32	80
Relevant experience	27	54	0	0
No previous conviction	13	26	8	20

While both male and female respondents indicated that they wanted a treasurer who is honest and trustworthy, the latter were overwhelmingly emphatic. A sizeable proportion of male respondents (54 %) indicated that they considered relevant experience while their female counterparts did not mention this attribute.

Criteria for Electing Entertainment Officer

The criteria mentioned by both male and female respondents included the following:

- A good entertainer, with adequate knowledge on entertainment issues

- Someone who is not shy

- An extrovert

- Someone with connections in the entertainment sector

- Someone who interacts with people from different backgrounds and with different ideologies

- Someone with an all-round character

- Someone with a sense of humour
- Someone who is taking Music as a major subject

Criteria for Electing Catering Officer

Views of the respondents fell into two main categories as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Criteria for Choosing Catering Officer

Criterion	Male responses	Percentage	Female responses	Percentage
Knowledge about Food & Nutrition (H/E main subject)	39	78	16	40
Health status & smartness	17	34	34	85

The table above shows conspicuous disparities between the views of male and female respondents. While most of the male respondents indicated that they would favourably consider someone with knowledge on Food and Nutrition and pursuing Home Economics as a major subject, most of their female counterparts indicated that the major consideration was the health status and smartness of the candidate.

Criteria for Electing Sports officer

The views of the respondents also fell into two main categories as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Criteria for Choosing Sports Officer

Criterion	Male responses	Percentage	Female responses	Percentage
Participation in sports	18	36	32	80
Knowledge about sports (PE main subject)	41	82	10	25

Most of the female respondents indicated that the sports officer ought to be a sports person himself/herself, excelling in one of the sporting disciplines at the college. On the other hand, most of the male respondents indicated that they considered as an ideal candidate, someone with a good knowledge

of sports matters, particularly a candidate who was taking Physical Education as a major subject at the college.

SRC Positions Suitable for Males, Females or Both Sexes.

Having indicated criteria for electing the different office bearers, the study sought to establish which positions, in the students' opinion, were suitable for which gender. Table 4 below summarises the findings of the study in this regard.

Table 4: Positions for Males, Females or Both Sexes

Position	Males only		Females only		Both sexes	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
President	76	84.4	0	0	14	15.6
Secretary general	58	64.4	8	8.9	24	26.7
Treasurer	0	0	57	63.3	33	36.7
Catering officer	0	0	70	77.8	20	22.2
Entertainment officer	20	22.2	14	15.6	56	62.2
Sports officer	22	24.4	8	8.9	60	66.7

Positions Suitable for Males

As shown in Table 4, being a president and secretary general, stick out as 'provinces' for males. The majority of the respondents indicated that the SRC president should be a male student. On this, they had this to say:

- As is always the case, males are the head of the family
- One needs to be brave in order to represent students without being threatened by lecturers
- This position needs someone who is prepared to face challenges
- Men are not looked down upon by society in general
- Most men are confident, have a voice, and can co-ordinate
- Women tend to be weak when put under pressure
- The position needs boldness given that it is risky, and may involve working after hours

A sizeable proportion of the respondents indicated that the secretary general should be a male student as well. The reasons they proffered included the following:

- As chief advisor to the president, the secretary general should be male so that the two can liaise without any barriers
- The position needed someone who was brave and prepared to face challenges
- Men tended to be better organised
- Men are eloquent orators
- The position is demanding, women do not want pressure
- Women lose focus when put under pressure

Positions for Females

As shown in Table 4, being a catering officer and treasurer, stick out as the domain of females. The majority of the respondents indicated that females are the best candidates for the position of catering officer. Their reasons were that:

- Women are natural cooks
- Women are well versed with cooking and hygiene in the home
- Females are naturally responsible for household chores
- Culturally, women are expected to do housework

A large number of the respondents indicated that they preferred a female to a male treasurer. Their views included that:

- Most females are honest and transparent on issues involving money
- Most women fear to misuse public funds
- Women are good banks
- Females are better organised when it comes to handling money

Positions for Both Sexes

As shown in Table 4, a sizeable proportion of the respondents indicated that both male and female students can take up the position of entertainment officer. The explanations they gave included that:

- One only needs to be knowledgeable and organised
- Any person can carry out the duties involved
- Both sexes are involved in entertainment in society

Data in Table 4 also show that a significant proportion of the respondents believed that any person could be a sports officer regardless of gender. The reasons they gave included that:

- Both men and women are actively involved in sports at college
- What is needed are credentials to lead and nothing else
- One only needed to be organised and knowledgeable
- The position required total commitment

At least 15.6 % of the respondents believed that each of the six SRC positions could be taken up by any person irrespective of his/her gender. Their explanations included that:
- Both males and females have the ability to handle all the positions
- No position should be restricted to one gender
- All positions can be taken up by both sexes
- It all depends on one's ability
- No position is superior or inferior

DISCUSSION

By and large, the criteria that the students indicated they used to select someone into the SRC did not only indicate gender sensitivity, but could also be considered to be objective. Good leadership qualities, intelligence, confidence, and good communication skills were considered desirable attributes for the positions of both president and secretary general. Attributes such as extroversion for the entertainment officer, relevant experience for both the catering officer and the treasurer, and a sporting background for the sports officer, suggested some degree of objectivity on the part of the respondents.

Concern about the health status of the catering officer, as indicated mostly by female respondents, can be attributed to the ravages of the HIV/AIDS pandemic which has not spared institutions of higher learning. However, the value that most male respondents attached to the possession of knowledge about Food and Nutrition and sports, conjures images of gender inequality, given that the two fields have traditionally been the domain of females and males respectively.

By and large, the data suggest that the gender divide could be crossed, with all students being able to access leadership positions in the SRC. The data thus, also suggest that the students' learning environment at this college is perhaps driven by an equal opportunities discourse. A further possible interpretation of the data is that, given that the respondents were final year students, it is possible they might have matured over time as a consequence of the various programmes offered at this college. Their maturity could have made them more gender sensitive. They have probably become aware of the leadership potential of both male and female students. Be that as it may, there, however, appeared to be a disjuncture between the above and subsequent views.

The data in Table 4 suggest that males are the preferred candidates for the positions of president and secretary general. These findings corroborate those from earlier studies which reported that males tended to take up the most powerful positions in society (Francis, 1998; Nyoni, 2004) ostensibly because they (males) were perceived to be more decisive, confident, and intelligent and were thought to possess good leadership qualities (Dorsey, 1989; Peterson & Runyan, 1999; Shizha, 2000). The findings also substantiate the argument by Marxist feminists to the effect that males continued to lead both in the public and private spheres (Bryson, 1992; Kornblum, 2008). The findings in the present study also replicate the observation made by the Zimbabwe Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture and UNICEF (2000), to the effect that there were fewer female than male school heads in Zimbabwean schools. The association between males and powerful leadership positions can perhaps be attributed to the patriarchal structure of the Zimbabwean society, an observation that has been made by radical feminists.

Table 4 shows that most of the respondents indicated that a female student is the ideal candidate for the position of catering officer. However, an analysis of the reasons that were proffered in favour of a female candidate suggests that such views could be associated with gender role socialisation. This is consistent with the argument by liberal feminists that the different social roles for females and males are constructed through socialisation agents such as the family, education, peer group, and the media (Macionis & Plummer, 2008). It is likely that, respondents in the present study could have been socialised from an early age that household chores are feminine. Sexual division of labour begins early in the family and is perpetuated and reinforced by other socialisation agents.

Data in Table 4 also show that a sizeable proportion of the respondents indicated that they preferred a female to a male treasurer. However, a look at the reasons advanced suggests that the choice of a female treasurer could have been for utilitarian or instrumental purposes. According to Francis (1998) the prevailing economic environment influences the discourses available to students, albeit to a limited extent. In this study, there is a likelihood that the respondents could have been aware of the unprecedented fraudulent activities executed to a larger degree by men in Zimbabwe's financial institutions as well as by former SRC treasurers (mostly male) in other institutions of higher learning. This might have tilted the pendulum in favour of female candidates for this position. On the other hand, the position can be seen as a ceremonial one in that, the presence of a male president and a male secretary general could mean that a female treasurer is incapacitated in terms of decision-making. However, this may not always be the case since some females have in fact, turned out to be the 'big brains' behind the operations of some establishments in the Zimbabwean society.

However, it was interesting to note that at least 15.6 % of the respondents reported that each of the six SRC positions could be taken up by any person, male or female. A look at their explanations suggests that both sexes had the ability to handle all the positions. This finding seems to be in accord with the observation by Kaziboni (2002) that, Zimbabwean women, like their male counterparts, can now make decisions in the home, at work, and even in government.

These gender neutral views can be a consequence of a number of factors. First, the gender education programmes offered by the college could have increased the respondents' sense of gender sensitivity. Second, the respondents' home environment perhaps advocates gender equality. Third and lastly, the commitment by political parties to address gender disparities by appointing women to leadership positions in areas traditionally considered to be the domain of men, might have contributed to such gender neutral views.

Implications of Findings for Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is a multifaceted concept. However, there is consensus among scholars that preconditions for sustainable development include issues such as health, economic policy, land use, areas of governance, organisational change, and education (Ansell, 2000; Ogbuigwe, 2008; Zaferatos, 2007). Furthermore, ongoing capacity building and leadership development are crucial in ensuring

education for sustainable development (Ogbuigwe, 2008). It follows that, tertiary institutions can play an important role in ensuring education for sustainable development through leadership development. Educational institutions, especially teacher training colleges, are the barometers of our society. Owing to their vantage position, their influence can cascade down to the different sections of society with serious implications on sustainable development.

The findings from this study have far reaching implications on sustainable development. In the same vein, Ansell (2000) argues that, a serious consideration of relevance to any discussion of sustainable development is the role of gender. In such discussions, it is necessary to consider the role commonly associated with women in relation to sustainable development: roles which are too frequently neglected. Of particular relevance is the performance of reproductive tasks such as household chores. In this study, this observation has been vindicated by the identification of the post of 'catering officer' with a female candidate.

The marginalisation of women as demonstrated by the research findings further buttress the role of educational institutions in perpetuating social inequalities with negative repercussions on sustainable development. Sustainable development cannot be fully realised when there are numerous gender inequalities in leadership. For instance, students who have assumed leadership positions in the SRC are more likely to be better prepared to take up other leadership positions in the various communities in which they will be eventually deployed upon completion of their training. Thus, the SRC can play an important role in leadership training. Such a forum has also some downstream or multiplier effects in that student teachers who were once in leadership positions can also impart leadership ethics in the children they teach with a positive effect on sustainable development. Another serious consideration worth its merit is that, in Zimbabwe, some of the students who have served in SRCs in colleges and universities have ended up assuming leadership positions, particularly in their respective political parties. Thus, the marginalisation of female students does not only perpetuate social inequalities, but further eclipses the role that they can play in promoting sustainable development.

RECOMMENDATIONS
Based on findings from this study, the following recommendations are made:

(a) There is need for deliberate efforts, on the part of college authorities, to ensure the representation of female students in every SRC by for example, reserving a specific number of positions for them.

(b) Where possible, the authorities should give both female and male students opportunities to address fellow students. This can be done during assemblies or lectures.

(c) Educational institutions should continue putting in place programmes that promote gender equality.

(d) There should be a deliberate effort to encourage male students to take up subjects that carry a feminine label (such as Home Economics) as majors, with the view to remove these negative labels.

(e) Educators and students should seize upon incidents of gender discrimination to provoke discussion.

CONCLUSION

Although the criteria that students used when electing fellow students into the SRC appear to be gender neutral, most students still harboured gendered perceptions of specific SRC positions and leadership in general. The influence of gender, however, tended to shift with specific SRC positions. For instance, a male student was more likely to be elected SRC president or secretary general, while a female student was more likely to be elected treasurer or catering officer. The discrepancy between the criteria that students used when electing someone into the SRC, and the explanations that they gave when identifying positions suitable for males and females, suggests that the students' views are socially constructed.

However, the presence of gender neutral views is not only progressive, but shows that deconstruction of gender is a feasible project after all. Both male and female students can take up any of the leadership positions in the SRC. The study concludes that the views proffered in feminist theory are applicable to the Zimbabwean situation, since they do not only provide a theoretical framework for the discourse on gender disparities, but also serve as a guide to action towards the deconstruction of gender, with possible downstream effects on sustainable development.

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