

## ABSTRACT

Gender equality is a right enshrined in the constitution of Zimbabwe under a full declaration of rights. The purpose of this research was to understand and discover the experiences and leadership challenges that female school heads encounter while leading schools resulting in gender disparities. Related literature helped put this study into context on leadership, female leadership, feminism, gender issues in education and disparities in educational leadership. This study was underpinned by the transformational theory because of its emancipatory nature that saw it befitting of the perspective of this research.

A qualitative approach was employed to obtain narratives on exploring gender disparities in school leadership positions. Specifically, the study focused on challenges, abusive cultures and experiences of 10 female school heads in Zimbabwe. Interviews, field notes and questionnaires were employed to get an in-depth information about the lives of the participants. Methodological triangulation was carried out to eliminate research prejudice and achieve trustworthiness. The purposive sampling frame was 99 out of the 268 school heads in Harare and 10 out of the 99 women heading primary and secondary schools in Harare were chosen. I evaluated socially acceptable norms, culture and values perpetuating gender disparities, articulating how they affect ascendancy to leadership positions and provision of educational leadership in Zimbabwe. The women's agency in mitigating gender disparities make them deviate from being passive in the quest towards gender parity. A descriptive analysis, interpretation and discussion of the strategies was employed to understand issues of gender parity.

The findings of this study have the potential to benefit educational stakeholders, including students, teachers, heads, parents, politicians, and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE), as well as gender activists and non-governmental organisations. From this perspective, my study reiterates that women are not passive recipients of these challenges; they devise mechanisms to mitigate and break the glass ceiling. The key themes established were aligned to the purpose of the study and linked directly to the research questions. Each finding led to a specific theme and was undergirded by the transformational theoretical framework and literature related to the study. In conclusion, I proffered recommendations that may serve as guidelines for rectifying the anomaly where female school heads are not treated same way as their male counterparts due to gender considerations.

**KEY WORDS:** Gender, Disparities, Educational Leadership, Female Leadership, Feminism.