Socio-Cultural Barriers Hindering Young Women from Attaining Leadership Roles in Primary Education System

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Abstract: *With particular reference to Bulawayo Metropolitan Province in Zimbabwe the study was conducted to determine the socio-cultural barriers hindering young women from attaining leadership roles in primary education system. This study was underpinned by a pragmatist research philosophy, which acknowledges that truth evolves through the interaction of ideas and experiences within context. The study adopted a case study design, an ideal qualitative research design that allows for an in-depth exploration of the specific context of young women's leadership within primary education. The study's target population included two primary groups: young women (25-35 years) and school administrators/education officials. Through purposive sampling, a sample size of 30 participants was deemed appropriate to capture nuanced insights into the experiences of young women in leadership within primary education. The study uncovered deeply entrenched socio-cultural barriers rooted in traditional gender role expectations that create significant obstacles to young women's leadership aspirations and effectiveness. Participants extensively described how cultural socialization from childhood positions girls to be supportive and accommodating while encouraging boys to be assertive and dominant, creating fundamental challenges when women attempt to display leadership qualities. The research revealed pervasive community resistance to young women's leadership, particularly from older community members and some male colleagues who had internalized traditional gender hierarchies. The intersection of professional leadership demands and domestic responsibilities emerged as one of the most significant barriers, with participants describing the exhausting "double burden" of excelling professionally while maintaining perfect homes and serving as primary caregivers. Development of institutional leaders, community, religion and parent education on socio-cultural barriers hindering young women's participation in primary education system is key in redressing these barriers.*

1. Introduction

Efforts to promote gender equality in educational leadership have been increasingly recognized as a priority at the global level. The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) has supported over 60 developing countries in implementing gender-responsive education sector plans. According to the GPE (2021), countries with these plans have seen a 15% increase in female leadership within the education sector over the past decade. These improvements, though modest, demonstrate the potential impact of well-designed gender-focused interventions at the policy level, serving as a model for other regions and sectors.

The influence of cultural norms and stereotypes on women's leadership aspirations is another critical global issue. Research by the International Labor Organization

(ILO, 2021) indicates that gender stereotypes contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership, with only 29% of global educational leaders being women. These stereotypes often manifest in the perception that men are more suitable for leadership roles, leading to biases in recruitment and promotion processes. The global community has recognized the need to address these biases through awareness campaigns and policy changes, but progress remains slow.

in Zimbabwe, the participation of women in leadership positions in the primary schools remain disproportionately low. According to the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZIMSTAT, 2022), women make up over 60% of the teaching workforce at the primary school level but occupy less than 20% of headteacher positions. This significant disparity points to deep-rooted structural and cultural barriers that limit women's advancement to leadership roles, despite their dominance in the teaching profession. These statistics reflect the broader challenges faced by women in Zimbabwe in achieving leadership positions across various sectors.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

In Zimbabwe, particularly in Bulawayo, the primary school system plays a crucial role in shaping the nation's educational foundation and societal development. However, young women face significant socio-cultural barriers that impede their access to leadership roles, such as headteachers, deputy heads, or other administrative positions within these institutions. These barriers, rooted in traditional gender norms, patriarchal structures, and cultural expectations, often prioritize male leadership and reinforce stereotypes that portray women as less capable or suitable for authoritative roles. For instance, societal pressures for women to prioritize domestic responsibilities, family obligations, and community expectations of modesty and subservience can discourage young women from pursuing or advancing in leadership positions. This issue is exacerbated in Bulawayo, where economic challenges and historical gender imbalances in education further limit opportunities for female empowerment. As a result, the underrepresentation of young women in primary school leadership not only perpetuates gender inequality but also hinders the overall quality of education, as diverse perspectives are essential for innovative school management and student outcomes. Despite growing recognition of gender equity in global development agendas, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), there is a paucity of localized research examining these specific barriers in Bulawayo's primary schools. This gap underscores the need for an in-depth investigation to identify the root causes, assess their impacts, and propose actionable strategies to promote inclusive leadership,

thereby fostering a more equitable educational environment in the region.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study was guided by the following objectives

1. To identify the specific socio-cultural barriers that hinder young women from attaining leadership roles in the primary school system in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.
2. To examine the impact of these socio-cultural barriers on the aspirations, career progression, and decision-making processes of young women in primary school leadership positions or those aspiring to such roles.
3. To recommend evidence-based solutions for stakeholders, including school administrators, policymakers, and community leaders, to enhance gender equity in leadership roles within Bulawayo's primary schools and contribute to broader societal change.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Social Role Theory

Social Role Theory offers another valuable perspective for understanding the gendered nature of leadership. Proposed by Eagly (1987), Social Role Theory posits that gender roles are culturally constructed and socially enforced, leading to stereotypical expectations about appropriate behaviours for men and women. According to this theory, men and women are socialized into distinct roles from an early age, with men often being encouraged to pursue assertiveness and leadership, while women are socialized to value nurturing and supportive behaviours. These societal expectations can significantly impact young women's leadership aspirations, as they may internalize these stereotypes and view leadership as inconsistent with their social roles (Eagly & Wood, 2020).

As reported by Carlson and Lynch (2021), Social Role Theory helps explain why leadership positions, particularly in educational settings, are often seen as male-dominated. This theory suggests that because society traditionally assigns men to leadership roles and women to supportive roles, young women may feel discouraged from aspiring to leadership or may face scepticism about their capabilities when they do pursue such roles. Carlson and Lynch's study highlight that social expectations around gender can contribute to "role incongruity," where women leaders are viewed as deviating from their expected roles. This incongruity often results in resistance or bias, as society grapples with reconciling women's leadership with traditional gender norms.

In a study conducted by Hu and Fang (2022), Social Role Theory was used to examine how gender norms influence young women's professional aspirations. The study found that women who express interest in leadership are often perceived as violating social expectations, which can lead to negative judgments and decreased support from their peers and superiors. Hu and Fang argue that these social perceptions serve as an additional barrier for young women in leadership, as they must navigate both the demands of their roles and the societal pressures to conform to traditional gender expectations. This insight is particularly relevant to educational leadership, where nurturing and supportive qualities are valued but are often overshadowed by a preference for assertive male leadership.

Social Role Theory also informs potential strategies to encourage young women's participation in leadership roles by addressing the need to redefine gender expectations. Research by Schmidt and Lee (2023) suggests that one way to overcome role incongruity is through awareness campaigns and educational programs that challenge traditional gender norms and promote an inclusive view of leadership. By redefining leadership to encompass a broader range of qualities such as empathy, collaboration, and adaptability these interventions can create an environment where young women feel more aligned with leadership expectations. Schmidt and Lee emphasize that changing perceptions of leadership to include traditionally "feminine" traits helps bridge the gap between social roles and leadership potential.

Furthermore, Social Role Theory suggests that creating a supportive social environment can mitigate the negative impact of gender stereotypes on young women's leadership aspirations. As noted by Murthy and Hossain (2022), social support networks, including mentorship programs and peer networks, provide young women with role models and encouragement, helping them to internalize leadership as an achievable goal. This aligns with the study's recommendation for mentorship and networking opportunities, as these initiatives counteract the limiting effects of traditional gender roles by fostering a supportive community that values women's leadership.

2.2 Social and cultural factors

Social and cultural factors play a significant role in shaping the opportunities available to young women in leadership, particularly within primary school environments. Traditional gender roles and stereotypes are especially powerful in many regions, dictating that women are more suited to caregiving roles rather than leadership positions. As noted in the work of Ridgeway and Kricheli-Katz (2020), societal expectations often define women's roles as supportive rather than authoritative, which subtly discourages young women from seeking leadership

positions. Gender stereotypes present leadership as a male-dominated sphere, an association that pressures women to conform to more traditionally feminine roles. This, in turn, not only reduces the visibility of women in leadership roles but also limits the ambition of potential young female leaders.

Additionally, family responsibilities and societal pressures often deter young women from assuming leadership roles. Research by Markus and Kitayama (2021) emphasizes how in many cultures, women are expected to prioritize family over career, creating a social barrier that young women face when considering leadership positions. This expectation is particularly prevalent in regions where patriarchal structures are dominant, reinforcing the belief that leadership and public-facing roles are incompatible with familial responsibilities. Consequently, women are often caught in a conflict between societal expectations and their personal aspirations for leadership, making it challenging to fully engage in professional development or to seek leadership roles.

Another critical social-cultural barrier is the lack of female role models and mentors. As highlighted by Rosser (2022), the absence of women in leadership positions creates a vacuum where young women cannot envision themselves in similar roles. Without role models, young women are less likely to develop the confidence or motivation to pursue leadership positions. Role models play a significant role in shaping aspirations, yet their scarcity in educational leadership positions signals to young women that leadership might not be an achievable goal. This lack of representation can further perpetuate a cycle of low female leadership participation, as fewer women in leadership results in fewer mentors and role models for the next generation.

Furthermore, societal attitudes towards women in authority can be discouraging. As reported by Cheung and Halpern (2020), young women in leadership positions are often subject to greater scrutiny and are judged more harshly than their male counterparts. This "double bind" situation requires women to navigate between being too assertive or not assertive enough, as both extremes tend to attract criticism. This fear of judgment and failure discourages young women from taking on leadership roles in the first place, as they anticipate a lack of support from both colleagues and the broader community.

Finally, cultural beliefs and norms related to education and leadership also contribute to the limited participation of young women in these roles. In a study conducted by Ngunjiri and Madsen (2021), it was found that in some communities, leadership is seen as incompatible with femininity, further reinforcing the idea that women should avoid these roles. The persistent belief that men are more suited to leadership roles creates a self-reinforcing cycle

where women are not considered for leadership, thereby continuing the male-dominant leadership structure. These cultural constraints create environments where young women face additional barriers that their male counterparts do not experience, reducing their participation in leadership roles.

3. Methodology

This study was underpinned by a pragmatist research philosophy, which acknowledges that truth evolves through the interaction of ideas and experiences within context. Pragmatism is particularly suitable for qualitative research addressing complex, real-world issues, such as young women's participation in leadership roles within primary education (Morgan, 2021; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2021). Considering the focus on the complex social factors impacting young women's leadership, this study employed a qualitative research approach. Qualitative methods were used to provide an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences, cultural dynamics, and personal perceptions that influence women's leadership opportunities.

The study adopted a case study design, an ideal qualitative research design that allows for an in-depth exploration of the specific context of young women's leadership within primary education. This design was chosen for its capacity to provide a comprehensive understanding of complex social phenomena in a particular setting (Creswell & Poth, 2021). In-depth interviews and focus group discussions with young women, school administrators, and education officials allowed the study to uncover the nuanced socio-cultural barriers and facilitators of leadership.
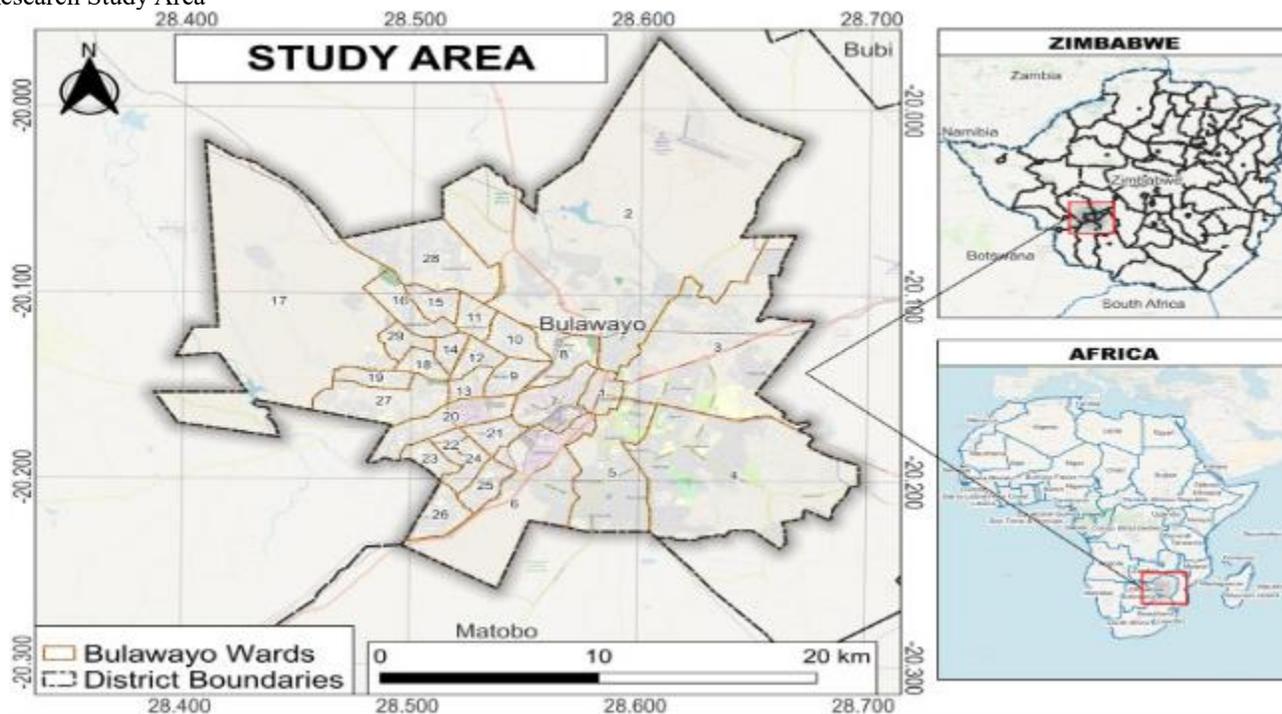
Research Study Area

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Figure 1: Research Area

The research was conducted in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, a key urban area in Zimbabwe known for its cultural and educational significance. Bulawayo's diverse schools, ranging from well-resourced to underprivileged, provided a comprehensive setting to study the socio-cultural barriers women face in leadership roles.

The study's target population included two primary groups: young women (25-35 years) and school administrators/education officials. Through purposive sampling, a sample size of 30 participants was deemed appropriate to capture nuanced insights into the experiences of young women in leadership within primary education.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process, particularly given the sensitive nature of the study's focus on gender and leadership. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines set by the Zimbabwe Research Council, ensuring compliance with national

research standards. These included; confidentiality, informed consent, privacy and anonymity.

4. Results and Discussion

Participants described how deeply rooted cultural beliefs and societal attitudes continue to restrict women's aspirations and participation in leadership positions. These norms often reinforce perceptions that leadership is a male domain, thereby discouraging young women from pursuing or being considered for such positions.

4.1 Traditional Gender Role Expectations and Cultural Resistance

Participants extensively discussed how deeply entrenched traditional gender roles create significant barriers to young women's leadership aspirations and effectiveness. Cultural expectations about women's primary responsibilities as caregivers, wives, and mothers significantly impact their career trajectories and professional recognition.

Aspiring Leader AL-08 provided comprehensive cultural analysis:

"The challenge we face goes far beyond individual prejudice - it's embedded in our cultural DNA. From childhood, girls are socialized to be supportive, accommodating, and deferential, while boys are encouraged to be assertive, competitive, and dominant. When you reach professional environments and attempt to display leadership qualities like decisiveness, strategic thinking, or authority, you're often labelled as 'difficult,' 'aggressive,' or 'unfeminine.' The double bind is exhausting - if you're too accommodating, you're seen as weak leadership material; if you're assertive, you're criticized for abandoning your cultural role as a woman. There's literally no winning space for authentic female leadership."

Young Women Leader YWL-06 shared her experience with community expectations:

"When I was appointed as head of our school, the first questions from community members weren't about my qualifications or vision for the school - they were about my marital status and whether I had children. There was an implicit assumption that leadership responsibilities would compromise my ability to fulfil my 'primary' roles as a wife and mother. Male heads never face such scrutiny about their personal lives or family arrangements. This double standard creates additional pressure where women leaders must constantly prove that they can balance professional

excellence with cultural expectations of feminine propriety."

School Administrator SA-02 observed the perpetuation of these expectations:

"Even well-meaning colleagues often reinforce these cultural barriers unconsciously. There's an expectation that women leaders should be more nurturing, more collaborative, and less authoritative than their male counterparts. When women display traditional leadership traits like firm decision-making or strategic vision, they're often described as 'acting like men' rather than being recognized as effective leaders. This creates an impossible situation where women must choose between being authentic leaders and maintaining cultural acceptability."

Ministry Official MO-09 acknowledged institutional reinforcement:

"Our educational system, despite official policies promoting gender equality, often reinforces traditional gender expectations through subtle mechanisms. School boards, parent-teacher associations, and community stakeholders frequently express preferences for male leaders, particularly for 'challenging' schools or during 'difficult' periods. The underlying assumption is that men are naturally better equipped to handle authority, discipline, and crisis management, while women are better suited for supportive and nurturing roles."

This finding resonates with contemporary research by Connell and Pearse (2022) on "hegemonic masculinity," which positions masculine traits as the standard for leadership effectiveness while devaluing typically feminine approaches to leadership. The social role theory perspective reveals how prescriptive stereotypes about women's roles create double-bind situations where women face criticism regardless of their leadership approach (Heilman and Eagly, 2024).

4.2 Community Resistance and Institutional Skepticism

Several participants described encountering systematic community resistance when assuming leadership roles, particularly from older community members, some male colleagues, and even some female peers who had internalized traditional gender hierarchies.

Young Women Leader YWL-05 recounted a detailed experience:

"*My appointment as school head was met with significant resistance from multiple quarters. Some parents openly questioned my ability to maintain school discipline, particularly with older male teachers and challenging student behaviour. They would bypass me entirely and take concerns directly to my male deputy, completely undermining my authority. During parent-teacher meetings, fathers would often address their questions to male staff members present, even when I was leading the meeting. The most hurtful part was when some women in the community suggested that I was 'too young and ambitious' and should 'focus on getting married and having children before taking on such responsibilities.' This resistance wasn't just from men - it came from women who had accepted traditional gender hierarchies as natural and appropriate.*"

Administrator SA-04 described systemic skepticism:

"*There's a pervasive mentality that young women are inherently too emotional, inexperienced, or temperamentally unsuited to handle the pressures and complexities of school leadership. This skepticism manifests in various ways - from questioning women's decisions more rigorously than men's, to attributing women's successes to luck or external support rather than competence, to expecting women to prove themselves repeatedly in ways that male leaders never have to. I've observed situations where women heads' authority was constantly challenged by staff, parents, and even students in ways that would never happen with male leaders.*"

Aspiring Leader AL-02 shared her observation of double standards:

"*The evaluation criteria for women and men in leadership seem fundamentally different. When a male head makes a tough decision, he's praised for strong leadership. When a woman makes the same decision, she's criticized for being harsh or unsympathetic. Male leaders are given the benefit of the doubt when things go wrong, while women are held personally responsible for every failure. This creates an environment where women must be perfect to be considered adequate, while men can make mistakes and still be seen as competent leaders.*"

Young Women Leader YWL-03 elaborated on intersectional challenges:

"*Age compounds the gender challenge significantly. Being young and female in leadership means facing dual skepticism - people question both your experience due to age and your suitability due to gender. Older male teachers in my school initially refused to take directives from me, and it took months of proving myself before gaining basic*

respect. *Even now, three years into my tenure, I face challenges that I know my male counterparts never encounter.*"

The feminist theory framework explains this resistance as manifestation of patriarchal power structures that seek to maintain male dominance in positions of authority (Hoks, 2021). These community attitudes reflect broader societal norms that associate leadership with masculine characteristics and view women's authority as somehow unnatural or threatening to social order. Recent research by Eagly and Heilman (2024) demonstrates how these attitudes persist across cultures and contexts, creating systematic barriers to women's leadership effectiveness even when they achieve formal positions of authority.

4.3 Work-Life Balance Challenges and the "Double Burden"

The intersection of professional leadership demands domestic responsibilities emerging as one of the most significant barriers affecting young women's leadership participation, effectiveness, and career sustainability.

Aspiring Leader AL-06 provided comprehensive analysis:

"*The work-life balance challenge for women in leadership is fundamentally different from what men experience. Society expects us to excel professionally while maintaining perfect homes, being primary caregivers for children, and managing extended family responsibilities. Male leaders have wives who typically manage domestic responsibilities, allowing them to focus primarily on their professional roles. As women, we're expected to be equally dedicated professionally while not compromising our family obligations. This double burden is exhausting and often unsustainable, particularly in leadership positions that require extensive time commitments and emotional energy.*"

Young Women Leader YWL-07 elaborated on practical challenges:

"*School leadership often requires working beyond normal hours - attending evening meetings, managing weekend events, being available for emergencies, and conducting home visits to students' families. While male leaders can easily accommodate these demands because their domestic responsibilities are typically managed by their spouses, women leaders face constant juggling acts. I've missed important family events, struggled with childcare arrangements, and felt guilty about prioritizing work over family or family over work. The stress of constantly trying*

to excel in both domains is overwhelming and affects leadership effectiveness."

Young Women Leader YWL-09 shared the emotional toll:

"*The guilt is perhaps the most challenging aspect. When I'm at work late dealing with school issues, I feel guilty about not being with my children. When I leave work early for family responsibilities, I worry about being seen as less committed than my male colleagues. There's no winning, and the emotional toll of constantly feeling inadequate in both roles is exhausting. I've considered stepping back from leadership several times, not because I don't love the work, but because the pressure of trying to be perfect in all areas of life is unsustainable.*"

Administrator SA-07 observed organizational insensitivity:

"*Our educational system still operates on traditional assumptions about leadership availability and commitment. Meetings are scheduled without consideration for family responsibilities, professional development occurs during weekends and school holidays, and there's an unspoken expectation that true leaders should prioritize work above all else. These expectations disadvantage women disproportionately and create barriers to their full participation in leadership development and networking opportunities.*"

Ministry Official MO-06 acknowledged policy inadequacy:

"*While we have policies promoting gender equality, we haven't adequately addressed the structural barriers that make it difficult for women to balance leadership responsibilities with family obligations. There are limited provisions for flexible working arrangements, inadequate childcare support, and insufficient recognition that effective leadership can take different forms that accommodate diverse life circumstances.*"

This challenge reflects what Hochschild (2019) terms the "second shift," where women bear disproportionate responsibility for domestic work while pursuing professional careers. The social role theory perspective highlights how conflicting role expectations create stress and limit women's leadership effectiveness (Eagly and Wood, 2023). Contemporary research by Sandberg and Grant (2024) demonstrates how organizational cultures that fail to accommodate diverse life circumstances systematically disadvantage women in leadership roles, creating retention and effectiveness challenges that ultimately impact organizational performance.

The socio-cultural barriers identified in this study demonstrate the continuing influence of traditional gender role expectations on women's professional advancement. The expectation that women should prioritize family responsibilities over career advancement reflects what Hochschild (2019) describes as the persistent gender division of labour that systematically disadvantages women professionally. These cultural expectations are particularly powerful because they are reinforced through multiple social institutions and appear "natural" rather than constructed.

The community resistance and skepticism toward young women's leadership capabilities reveals how gender stereotypes operate at community levels to undermine women's authority and effectiveness. This resistance is not simply individual prejudice but reflects broader cultural narratives about leadership that associate authority and competence with masculine characteristics (Connell and Pearse, 2022). The double standards applied to women and men leaders demonstrate how the same behaviours are interpreted differently based on gender, creating impossible situations where women cannot win regardless of their approach.

The study uncovered deeply entrenched socio-cultural barriers rooted in traditional gender role expectations that create significant obstacles to young women's leadership aspirations and effectiveness. Participants extensively described how cultural socialization from childhood positions girls to be supportive and accommodating while encouraging boys to be assertive and dominant, creating fundamental challenges when women attempt to display leadership qualities. The research revealed pervasive community resistance to young women's leadership, particularly from older community members and some male colleagues who had internalized traditional gender hierarchies. This resistance manifested through questioning women's decisions more rigorously than men's, attributing women's successes to luck rather than competence, and expecting women to prove themselves repeatedly in ways that male leaders never experienced. The intersection of professional leadership demands domestic responsibilities emerging as one of the most significant barriers, with participants describing the exhausting "double burden" of excelling professionally while maintaining perfect homes and serving as primary caregivers. This challenge was compounded by organizational cultures that operate on traditional assumptions about leadership availability, with limited recognition that effective leadership can accommodate diverse life circumstances.

The study also offers empirical evidence supporting feminist critiques of cultural resistance to women's

leadership. The widespread belief that women should prioritise family obligations, coupled with societal skepticism towards their leadership competencies, reflects what Hooks (2020) refers to as the ideological control of women's roles in both public and private spheres. Similarly, Madsen and Longman (2022) highlight how such gender stereotypes function as mechanisms of social control that entrench male-dominated hierarchies under the guise of cultural tradition.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The findings lead to the conclusion that traditional cultural norms and gender role expectations operate as powerful mechanisms for reproducing gender hierarchies within educational institutions. Despite progressive policy frameworks and constitutional commitments to gender equality, deeply entrenched cultural beliefs about women's "appropriate" roles continue to shape community attitudes, institutional practices, and even women's own aspirations and self-perceptions. The research demonstrates that cultural resistance to women's leadership transcends individual prejudice to constitute what can be termed cultural hegemony, where traditional gender norms are accepted as natural and inevitable rather than socially constructed and changeable. This conclusion suggests that sustainable progress toward gender equality requires fundamental cultural transformation alongside structural and policy reforms.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following evidence-based recommendations are proposed to enhance young women's participation in leadership roles within the education sector in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province:

The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education

- Implement Comprehensive Leadership Development Programs
- Establish Flexible Work Arrangements
- Develop Gender-Responsive Career Pathways

The Community Leadership

- Launch Community Sensitization Campaigns
- Engage Traditional and Religious Leaders
- Create Visible Role Model Programs
- Develop Parent and Community Education

The Non-Governmental Organizations

- Build Cross-Generational Women's Networks
- Establish Women's Leadership Centers
- Develop Peer Learning Networks

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