

# **Uncovering Administration Challenges Faced by Female Social Sciences Heads of Department in Selected Secondary Schools of Lusaka Urban District in Zambia**

## **Abstract**

Managing a school department should be tilted towards achieving set goals and creating value for the education system. There seems to be poor performance in social sciences departments that are headed by females in secondary schools. This inefficiency at departmental levels has negative impact on the overall performance of schools. Therefore, the aim of this study is to unearth issues related to management of social sciences departments by female heads in some secondary schools in Zambia. The study followed a descriptive research design to generate evidence on experiences of female headed social sciences departments in some secondary schools. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews from a total sample of 25 participants. The data was analysed using a thematic approach with elements of comparative analysis especially across the gender spectrum. The findings show that subject loads, constrained resources especially teaching aids, managing high numbers of staff in the departments as well as teacher absenteeism were main challenges faced. It was also found that the high rate of permission, to be out of school, seeking behaviours to stay away from work by some teachers compromised teaching thereby testing the leadership of these female heads. Additionally, the limited office space or lack of adequate infrastructure for operations such lesson plan preparations hampered effective management of social science department. Therefore, the study concluded that challenges experienced by female social sciences heads of department are both structural and material. It is recommended here that the Ministry of Education should increase funding in social sciences departments as they represent the largest in schools. Also, the school administrators to be organizing and offering periodic training to the Heads of departments in various subject areas on their roles so as to get acquitted with new changes in the school system.

**Key words:** *Head of department, school, social sciences, teachers, Lusaka*

## **1. Introduction**

The success of any school depends on how effective its leadership is [1]. Those assigned with managerial roles have to be exceptional and comparatively excellent in their leadership styles

[2,3]. Their managerial activities are to be tailored on meeting school objectives. However, Alma and colleagues [4] notes that the status of school administrators is very central and very complex. In the execution of their managerial duties, heads of department are faced with a myriad of challenges ranging from, discipline issues amongst the staff and students among others. Management challenges have a potential to undermine performance of the school henceforth strategies have to be put in place [5].

Theoretically, the government of Zambia gives great recognition to women's rights and considers them as an integral part of attaining equity and equality in all spheres of life [6]. However, the existential reality at the grassroots level is that women are discriminated, marginalized and denied their opportunity to be employed and to hold higher positions. This is well-articulated in the Zambia National Gender Policy of 2014 by stating that despite identifying women's participation in decision-making as critical to sustainable development, women are largely under-represented in decision-making at all levels in institutions including in the Education sector [7].

#### *Statement of problem and need of the study*

The need for this study emanates from the policy guidelines that are aimed at promoting women inclusion in key positions including school departments. The above-named policy highlights that achieving gender equality requires both men and women to be given equal opportunities at all levels.

However, managing a school department can be daunting if seen through a gendered lens. Achieving set goals so as to create value for the department and the school at large. In spite of strong frameworks that support women in leadership, there has been difficulties in the appraising processes of the performance of female social sciences heads compared to their male counterparts as well as other departments in schools (20). This appears to have negative impact on the overall performance of schools. The main problem in this research lies in the shortfall of management strategies used by female heads of social sciences department in improving learning and teaching. If this problem is not addressed, it has potential to cause frustration and

inefficiency in the management and running of the departments thereby affecting the overall school performance by both the learners and teachers.

### *Aim and study objectives*

The aim of this study was to unearth management challenges experienced by female heads of social sciences departments in some secondary schools of Lusaka. The aim of this study was pursued through the following key objectives: 1) To determine management strategies employed by female social sciences heads of department in secondary schools. 2) To establish management challenges experienced in departments headed by females in secondary schools. 3) To explore the kind of support some of the social sciences heads of department receive from their school administrations during their tenure of office.

### *Study delimitation*

The delimitation of this study is based on both the geographical scope and empirical understanding of topical issues that surround this study. Geographically, the study was confined to Lusaka urban district because of high number of secondary schools and teacher- human resource under social sciences department in these schools. Empirically, only departments headed by females within the faculty of social sciences was considered for this research.

The paper is divided into four main parts. The first section gives a brief background around issues of school managerial roles. In the second part, a theoretical account of the school leadership is given. The third part, is a methodology, the fourth section presents main findings supported by emblematic quotes and the fifth gives a discussion. The sixth and final section is a conclusion which gives a final analysis with some recommendations. In the section that follow, we start with a theoretical description of school leadership and management roles within a gendered context.

## **1.1 Contextualizing gender roles in school management roles**

In light of management challenges, it has been observed that women in leadership are faced with the dilemma of balancing the societal expectations of women regarding their family

responsibilities with that of the leadership at the workplace [8]. In view of the foregoing, a study in Zimbabwe on challenges faced by female head of department at primary school established that organisational factors, culture, women's personalities and colonial legacies are obstacles challenging the effectiveness of females in school administration [9].

In reference to management challenges faced by female leaders, a Kenyan study on the problems faced by female head teachers in administration of secondary schools in Thika district [10], indicated that sex role stereotyping, insecurity in schools, role conflicts between traditional and administrative roles as well as personal barriers are major challenges faced by female head teachers in the administration of the secondary schools. Giving a closer examination to the above findings, it can be argued that sex-role stereotyping, cultural traditions, negative perceptions from teachers and stakeholders to female head teachers, dual responsibility of motherhood and school manager are major challenges faced by female principals in the management of secondary schools.

Similarly, if these female heads of departments are living with HIV, their identity and roles become complex as leaders living chronic condition [11]. Despite the observation that women face challenges once assigned leadership roles, critiques have commented that in a number of occasions, gender plays a very limited role as far as leadership is concerned. This position was confirmed in comparative study of women in management [12] in South Africa and United Kingdom as well as in a study on political leadership in African countries [2]. The aforementioned study established that apart from lack of mentorship and formal preparation for the position, the women did not experience any major obstacles prior to becoming head of department.

There is a belief that female Heads of Department (HoDs) are not equal to the tasks of leading others in schools' settings [13]. In Zambia, majority of teachers are not grounded on ethics that govern teaching and learning [14]. Despite empirical studies conducted on challenges faced by those assigned with school managerial roles, there was still scanty information in academic literature on gender related challenges on school leadership in secondary schools in Lusaka, Zambia.

Managing a school department should be tilted towards achieving set goals so as to create value for the department and the school at large [4]. To the contrary, there has been poor performance of female leaders in schools as compared to male counterparts in schools [15]. This appears to have negative impact on the overall performance of schools. The main issue here is that there seems to be a silence by researchers on management strategies used by female heads of social sciences department in secondary schools in Zambia. The issue of gender prejudices in leadership in schools is a problem which, if not addressed, has potential to cause frustration and inefficiency in the management and running of departments and schools.

### **1.2 School Leadership: A Theoretical View**

This study was guided by the “Great Man” Theory by Carlyle [16]. The “great man” theory is a 19th century idea according to which history can be largely explained by the impact of “great men”, or heroes who are highly influential individuals who, due to their personal charisma, intelligence, wisdom or political skill utilized their power in a way that had a decisive historical impact. The assumption of the great man theory is that, the capacity of leadership is inherent—that is, great leaders are born not made.

Leaders are assumed as born with innate qualities and traits that make them better suited to leadership. This proposition portrays great leaders as heroic, mythic and destined to rise to leadership when needed. This means that, school leaders with charisma motivate subordinates. Subordinates are then willingly to be involved in activities of the schools [17]. Zoning this theory to the current study, social sciences heads of department should be leaders with charisma so that they are confident in handling management challenges as they come. In view of this, it is evident that this theory was suitable for this study in the sense that it is associated with traits that leaders should have like intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability, commitment towards the task, motivating the people and taking a risk in ensuring that departmental and school activities are well performed.

## **2. Methodology**

*Research strategy and design*

This was qualitative research as it was focused on exploring experiences and perceptions of female heads of departments in schools with a descriptive research design. The qualitative techniques used here included gathering of opinions, concepts and experiences. This was targeted at five secondary schools that were selected purposively. This study design falls within the constraints of constructivist and relativist ontology worldview whose argument hold that knowledge generation and knowing a reality of a particular phenomenon requires social interaction with people. This entails that the researchers had an opportunity to interact with participants to generate evidence on challenges faced by female social sciences heads of department [18].

#### *Sampling technique and sample size*

The researchers used homogenous purposive sampling to recruit participants to his study. This form of sampling was used as it allowed for the exploration of participants characteristics. The inclusion criteria involved selection based on belonging to the social sciences departments, secondary schools, female teachers who have served as heads of department. The exclusion technique was clear on that anyone who was not within a secondary school, social sciences member or has no experience of working with or as a female head of department were not included in the study sample. The study recruited a total of 25 participants from five selected secondary schools of Lusaka urban district. The sample comprised of teachers of Civic Education and school Administrators and it was arrived at through data saturation in reference to the research objectives.

#### *Data collection tools*

Data was collected using semi structured interviews. The development of interview question guides involved following some initial theoretical framings that were drawn from the literature review on aspects of school leadership and management in general. The tools for data collection were tested for validity and reliability through a multilayered approach which Semi-structured interview schedules were advantageous because it is flexible in nature as it accords the interviewer chance to ask further questions that could arise from the replies given by the participants. During face-to-face interviews, participants were allowed to express themselves

freely thereby bringing out additional and relevant information. This granted the researchers an opportunity to gather further and more in-depth information from the participants.

#### *Data collection procedure and ethical considerations*

Given that the study was on generating understanding of the challenges encountered by social sciences heads of department in schools, the procedure of collecting data from participants followed a systematic way. All potential individuals who were identified to be participants in the study were approached through the school administrations. The participants were carefully selected based on characteristics that relate to not just gender or being a head of department or teacher in the social sciences but also with a view to the unique information and insights that they can contribute, in this case people who are serving as school principals were also considered. The study relied on primary data which was collected through an interview guide with semi-structured questions [19]. Interviews were recorded using a dictator phone and stored as soft copies. Participants were informed about the recording of the interviews beforehand and these were held in a comfortable place of their choice.

#### *Data analysis*

Data from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis by taking note of the ideas that emerged in relation to the various topical issues of the study. The audio recordings were transcribed and coded. The coding process involved labelling and conceptualising some of the main responses from the participants by way of classifying similar ideas. This analytical approach, allowed the researchers reviewed the collected data and identified information that was also relevant to the research aim and objectives. Summaries of the findings from the transcribed scripts were synthesized and interpreted in relation to existing literature on the topic.

#### *Validity and trustworthiness*

The research findings accurately reflect the situation and certain in the sense that research findings are supported by the evidence. To ensure credibility, transferability, conformability, and dependability, the researchers' beliefs or social/ behavior phenomena are context bound. The process of validating the findings and there analysis thereof, the information was subjected to peer reviews as well as tested by comparatively looking at what is already known in scholarly

literature and notes from the field observed during the interview. The ultimate purpose of was not to transfer research findings to other studies that has been done but rather to validate understandings of the phenomena under study from the participant's viewpoints (Gunawan, 2015). This study addressed confirmability by establishing trail of records such as interviews transcripts, reflected on journaling following interviews, notes on planned activities on related data analysis and all drafts of the research reports.

### 3. Findings

The first part of the findings gives some demographic information of the study participants. The section further presents findings that were collected through face to face interviews with participants. The section has key parts that focus on specific themes which overlap in some instances: Subject management, management of overpopulated human resource, Teacher absenteeism and frequent permission, material constraints and limited space for operation. In order ascertain transferability and level of generalisation, participants demographics characteristics are presented in table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 25)

| <i>Gender</i>  |    | <i>Age</i>    |    | <i>Education level</i> |    | <i>Role/position</i> |    | <i>Years in education/teaching</i> |    |
|----------------|----|---------------|----|------------------------|----|----------------------|----|------------------------------------|----|
| <b>Females</b> | 23 | 25<br>–<br>34 | 3  | Primary                | 0  | Headteacher          | 5  | 2- 5                               | 8  |
| <b>Males</b>   | 2  | 35<br>–<br>44 | 12 | Secondary              | 0  | Head of department   | 5  | 6 – 10                             | 12 |
|                |    | 45<br>+       | 10 | Tertiary               | 25 | Teacher              | 15 | 11 – 15                            | 5  |

#### 3.1 Subject load management

The interviewed participants talked about the management of subjects which are not in the area of specialisation or major of an HoD. The majority of participants stated that female HoDs faced a lot of challenges in the running of departments due to several subject areas they have manage with limited knowledge and not trained in. It was mentioned that leading a department which comprised more than three subjects was not an easy task as HoDs are not specialised in all the subjects. Some of the views to support this theme are demonstrated in the comment below by an P21:

*As I have already mentioned our department is vast which consist of four subjects and I personally Civic Education is my major. I have done Civic Education and Religious Education and for these other subjects am not conversant with them. Too many sections and in those sections each one with their own character and especially that the head of department does not major in all those subjects that are in that department so it becomes somehow a challenge.*

From the above quote, it can be seen that the challenge of managing subjects by HoDs is complex. The high number of sections with different subject areas in the social sciences departments in schools is good but it also makes subject load management hard for heads of departments to control, especially when there are many cases of absentee teachers.

From the above responses, it is clear that the multidisciplinary nature of social sciences department with several subjects undermines effective performance in the teaching process for most female HoDs in schools that lack adequate material and infrastructure support.

### **3.2 Management and control of high levels of teaching staff**

Management of over-populated staff was another challenge faced by female social sciences HoDs. Out the 25 participants, the majority of the participants stated that a social sciences department has teachers with different personalities, work culture and characteristics which make it difficult for the HoDs to manage those working under them most of the times. It was stated that some of these teachers could intimidate HoDs especially those that have higher

qualifications. Some of the oral responses from the participants show some contempt in the manner other staff members deal with female HoDs. For instance, P6, a male teacher of Civic Education commented:

*I think when you look at the social sciences department that is the largest department that we have in school, so one of the challenges which is there is human resource, how to manage these people that are so many.*

The above quote demonstrates the issue of staffing levels which can be overwhelming due to the number of subjects' areas being offered within social sciences. Going by the above quotes, it can be seen that human resource in terms of high staffing levels in social sciences departments makes it serious challenge to manage by some HoDs. Having too many teachers in a department that has limited space and resources can be a challenge for some HoDs. Participants reported that the larger the group of teachers in a department the more difficult it is to manage and coordinate the work they do.

### **3.3 Teacher absenteeism and frequent need for out of school permission**

Teacher absenteeism and frequent request for permission to be out of school was another challenge faced by the female Sciences HoDs in the running of the department. Sixteen out of 25 participants mentioned that some teachers had a habit of coming for work and seek permission to leave the school much earlier in the day. This was creating a situation which compromised the teaching process as the HoDs often fail to find someone to stand in for out of school teachers at the last minute. In relation to the above, P23 said the following:

*I think the first one is absenteeism. The issue of absenteeism by the teachers is a challenge. Late coming for work is another issue. Abrupt notification of absence I think that disturbs the work. Somebody should be in class at 7:20 and they are calling you at 7:25 or 7:30 they will not be in class and you have a class to attend to, you have to stop what you are doing to find somebody to stand in for that other person and things like that.*

Dealing with absent teachers was a big challenge for most HoDs. From the above quotations and since the role of HoDs is to ensure that teaching and learning takes place,

having teachers who miss classes is very hard, especially if the head of department is female. The participants spoke about male teachers who miss classes and have no regard for the head if it is a female. In cases where many teachers miss the classes, it is even very challenging to cover up for all the absentee teachers at the same time.

From the above quotes we can see that some teachers under social sciences departments take advantage of the high staffing levels which at times have made some not report for work on the pretext that other teachers will cover their classes.

### **3.4 Teaching and learning material constraints**

Material constraints to run the departments effectively was another challenge faced by female social sciences HoDs. Out of the 25 participants nine mentioned that in as much as the department received material support from the school and the Ministry of Education, teaching aids were not enough to cater for the numbers of pupils in all grades and classes. It was revealed that most of the schools had more than 70 pupils in one class hence the available books do not cater for huge numbers. It was found that some departments had only about three to four text books of Civic Education to cover for three streams of class with minimum of 50 learners in each class. As noted by P6, below:

*While, they have provided the materials that are required to teach but not so fully. Why I have said not so fully because certain materials that are required to teach they are not provided. I will give you an example like in Civic Education you need documents like newspapers, you need a copy of the constitution which we do not have, the current copy which we do not have and many others that I cannot manage to mention that are required in the process of teaching and learning those materials if they are not provided they don't make someone to teach more effectively.*

To give more evidence that materials in teaching and learning are a challenge in the management of the department by the HoDs, participants reported on limited teaching materials can hinder the work of heads of departments as most teachers will put pressure on them to provide these resources even when they are not able to do so.

It is clear from the above remarks that social sciences departments do not have enough teaching and learning materials as such, this presents a challenge in having meaningful lesson delivery which is a mandatory obligation that HoDs must achieve through the teachers working under their jurisdiction.

### **3.5 Limited work space for operation**

Apart from the above reported challenges, limited space for work was another issue that was encountered by female social sciences heads of departments. From the 25 participants, only 8 stated that since the department had a lot of teachers, it was difficult to be in one place where you could share ideas on for example effective teaching. Results shows that some HoDs of social sciences shared an office with other HoDs a situation which could undermine confidentiality and effective management of the social sciences departments. It was reported that in such circumstances, it was difficult for HoDs to hold departmental meetings which are necessary in discussing how teachers are doing, challenges they are facing and solutions for improvement. Commenting on this issue P12 said the following:

*First of all, I think it is infrastructure. We don't have a room where we can interact as a department and know maybe it is because the school has been upgraded, the HOD share one office so you don't have that confidentiality were you can talk one on one with her unless you just make arrangements you meet somewhere with the HOD.*

The majority of participants talked about how hard it is to find space to even have departmental meetings. This lack of office space has proved to be a hindrance to effective coordination and monitoring of teachers' work as they are not all in same working space. The above results represent the majority of participants' views on limited space for work. This challenge of lack of infrastructure was reported as being for HoDs beyond the social sciences but also other departments. In relation to working space, it was also reported by participants that heads from different departments were sharing offices in some schools.

## **4. Discussion**

The demographic information in table 1 above shows that the sample was ideal for the topic under study. The above findings have shown that despite putting some strategies, such as covering up for absentee teachers, in the running of the department, HODs were faced with systemic challenges on a daily basis. As noted, subject load management was one of the reported challenges HoDs faced in the running of the department. It was revealed that the majority of schools' social sciences department had many subject areas of which HoDs were not specialised in, thereby causing a hindrance in terms of standing in for teachers who miss classes. In as much as the departments were decentralized into section as discussed earlier, managing several subjects appeared too much for some HoDs. This shows that there is need for the technical know-how on how the HoDs can handle departments with several subject areas. That is why some participants suggested that once in a while, HoDs should be taken for refresher courses meant to enhance their performance even in subjects and managerial skills that they may not have been trained in. This finding is similar to the work of Muleya [14], which stressed that some teachers are not well grounded on ethics that govern teaching and learning hence making it difficult to achieve the missions of schools, and more broadly education goals.

Also, high staffing levels in a single department can make control and monitoring of teachers performance difficult. The high number of teachers represented in departments of social sciences as reported here denotes various working culture among them which can be daunting for some female HoDs. It is for this reason that some participants talked about the Ministry of Education deploying more teachers to already over populated schools in urban Lusaka was a cause of the high numbers of staff in social sciences in the township schools. These are part of the challenges of the modern human resource, which involves high urbanisation of workforce [23]. The school – teacher ratios seem to be high in urban areas with more teachers being stationed in schools that have high staffing levels, causing shortages in remote or rural schools, as found by Mufalo and colleagues [20].

Moreover, teacher absenteeism and request for frequent permission to be out of school by some teachers was a challenge that the HoD faced in the running of the department. Managing teachers in a department who have less dedication to duty and do not have ethos of being at work can result in poor performance and compromises the teaching process. The above finding is not

consistent with the situation in Kenya, where problems faced by female head teachers in administration of secondary schools was not about teacher absenteeism but shaped by gender role stereotyping, insecurity in schools, role conflicts between traditional and administrative roles as well as personal barriers [10]. Comparative, this current study's results indicate that stereotyping based on one's gender was not a big challenge for the Zambian female HoDS in selected secondary schools [2, 22].

It is clear from findings, limited teaching materials in the social sciences department means that female HoDs are restricted in terms of managing fellow teachers who need teaching aids. As noted, the Ministry of Education, teaching aids were not enough to cater for the numbers of pupils in class. This finding is a common challenge for female heads of departments even countries like Zimbabwe where there are shortages of financial and material resources to run the department effectively [9].

Our findings suggest that female HoDs' work is negatively affected by limited space for operations and meetings. It was revealed that since the department had a lot of teachers, it was difficult to be in one place where the HoDs and their subordinates could share ideas on how effectively teaching can be done. Limited space also made it difficult for HoDS to hold departmental meetings which are necessary for discussing how teachers are doing, challenges they are facing and solutions for improvement. School facilities can have a profound impact on both teacher and student outcomes.

Finally, the fact is that most offices and classrooms in the selected schools are far from ideal spaces for teaching and learning, as these were originally designed and built with little or no consideration of high staffing levels. This finding does not resonate well with "Great Man" Theory by Carlyle [17] in the sense that lack of spaces that can accommodate all members of staff in a department has the potential to prevent HoDs from showing their personal charisma, intelligence, wisdom and utilization of their power in a way that has a decisive historical impact on department and school performance. School leadership, HoDs inclusive, that is effective requires that the working environment is comfortable for not just meetings but lesson preparations which can ultimately produce good academic results and high completion rates [21].

## **5. Conclusion and recommendations**

The study has found that challenges experienced by some HoDs revolve around multifaceted issues such as managing high staffing levels for many subjects within the same department, rampant teacher absenteeism as well as material constraints that hamper effective running of the social science departments. It has been highlighted in this study that some of these challenges faced were not only unique to female social sciences heads but also encountered by male heads of department in other fields. It was clear that the reported challenges were being addressed at a micro level with temporal measures such as covering up for absent teachers. Based on the findings, the following three recommendations need attention if schools and their departments are to thrive: First, the Ministry of Education should appoint Heads of the departments based on merit and not gender to avoid job on training. Second, the Ministry of Education should consider deploy new teachers to schools that have low staffing levels. Third, school administrations working with the Ministry of Education should develop trainings around leadership for Heads of the departments so as to empower them in their day to day roles and adapting to new changes in the education eco-system.

## **6. Limitations and suggestions for future research**

The process of attempting to collect data started in 2020 and the recruitment of study participants was challenging due to COVID-19. Most of the participants operated on rotational basis hence there were not readily available for interviews on time. Restrictions on meetings during lockdowns and closures prolonged the time frame to complete this study. Findings of this study must be treated with caution as the sample was small for generalisation, however, the theoretical grounding generated through themes in this paper can be applied in different school contexts.

Since this study focused on female heads of department, in future a comparative study should be done in order to understand and appreciate the challenges faced by both male and female school managers. This will help in devising long term solutions on some of the structural and procedural challenges faced by individuals who manage not just departments but sections and schools as a whole.

## **Ethical Approval and Consent**

Before conducting this study and engaging participants in an interview, ethical issues were followed starting with application for clearance by the University of Zambia ethical clearance committee [REF No. HSSREC:-2021 DEC-014], later seeking permission from District Education Board Secretaries as well as from gatekeepers such head teachers in selected schools and the actual participants.

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