Outsiders inside: The place of new, inexperienced female school heads in the community

Cynthia Dzimiri\textsuperscript{1,}*, Loyiso C. Jita\textsuperscript{1}\textsuperscript{1}

Abstract: While women representation has improved, people still need to change their mindset when it comes to female school leaders in different societies. We argue that female heads are placed and perceived differently in society. Based on the interpretivist paradigm, we used the qualitative approach. A multiple case study design was adopted, and five female school heads were purposively selected. Semi-structured interviews were used and various findings were made, including that new female school heads receive more inspections from education authorities than new male heads, crying is a therapy for some female school heads, family support is needed by new and inexperienced school heads. In addition, female and married school heads are respected and welcomed more than single female school heads and those who have a different religious affiliation are negatively stereotyped by communities. Lack of training was also found to contribute to the challenges faced by female school heads. A few recommendations were made. After the appointment, new school heads should be given enough time to settle before inspections. Families and stakeholders should give female heads the necessary support in their early years of promotion and new female heads should start in their home areas so as to build confidence.

Subjects: Education - Social Sciences; Gender Studies - Soc Sci; Educational Research; School Leadership, Management & Administration; Classical Studies; Cultural Studies

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cynthia Dzimiri is a senior Sociology lecturer at Great Zimbabwe University in Zimbabwe. She obtained her PhD a few years ago and presently coordinating the sociology section. Before joining the university, Cynthia worked a school head in Botswana hence the interest in issues that concern women in school leadership. She has co-authored a number of articles focusing on other contemporary issues such as poverty, early marriages and many others. Cynthia is married and is a mother of two. Besides being a professional she likes farming, watching TV and travelling although she has not yet amassed enough money to take her beyond the borders of her own country so as to network with other female researchers.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This research is from a wider research I did at PhD level which was focusing on the experiences of female secondary school heads in Zimbabwe. The wider research revealed the different experiences they had as female heads in Zimbabwean secondary schools. It is from these findings that we decided to pursue the issue of female school heads’ experiences of their early years of leadership. The current research discovered that inexperienced female school leaders still face several challenges in the communities they operate. Another aim was to find ways of reducing these challenges faced by newly appointed female school heads through the analysis of these women’s stories. Based on the literature I gathered during my studies I feel that there is still a research dearth on issues that concern women in leadership especially in African countries where patriarchal practices dominate.
Keywords: Community; female school leaders; feminine; gender; stakeholders; feminist challenges; promotion stereotype

1. Introduction

Women's representation seems to have improved greatly worldwide (Chityori et al., 2018; Shava et al., 2021; Stead, 2013). However, gender seems to matter when it comes to how people respond to leaders. Some of the data that were used in this paper are from a more extensive research project carried out as a thesis on the experiences of female secondary school heads in Zimbabwe. Since the larger research had just one rural female school head and two urban heads as participants, we felt that more findings could be revealed if more rural heads were added to this further research since their communities are different from urban ones. In this light, through interviews, we wanted to hear female heads' stories when they were first promoted to leadership. This instrument is compatible with feminist ideas. It allows women the chance to speak out on the issues that concern them rather than having views imposed on them by the researcher without their direct involvement (Mahlase, 1997; S. Smith, 2018).

According to Chabaya et al. (2009), the underrepresentation of women in positions of leadership has led to the passing of new policies and laws, such as the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995 outlaws discrimination based on sex and race, among other constructs. The Gender Affirmative Action Policy of 1992 and Public Service Circulars Number 11 of 1992, Number 22 of 1996, and Number 1 of 1997 encourage heads of stations to identify and encourage women to apply for promotion posts. To understand women's issues surrounding promotions, one has to listen to their stories (Makhasane et al., 2018; Magadime et al., 2010). As people listen to women's stories, they tend to redefine their meanings, leading to new perspectives on women's issues (Weedon, 1997). The bulk of existing research in different countries concentrates on the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions (Blackmore, 2013; Chabaya et al., 2009; Coleman, 2012; Grogan & Sherman, 2010; J. Smith, 2015; S. Smith, 2018), and little attention is given to the nature of the challenges new and inexperienced female school heads face in the communities they are posted to as school heads, which is the focus of this research. Relevant literature was consulted to provide a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding women in school leadership through a critical feminist lens.

2. Theoretical framework

Traditional and dominant leadership theories may not adequately explain the perceptions and experiences women gain in the carrying out of their jobs as female leaders (Bass, 2009). This research mainly concentrated on women issues as aspects of feminist concerns. Crossman (2020) advocates that feminist theory illuminates social problems, trends, and issues that are otherwise overlooked or misidentified by the historically dominant male perspective within social theory. Greyling and Steyn (2015) argue that although the feminists have a common goal of emancipating women, they vary their views and even dispute when looking at women's circumstances and experiences in society. This shows that there is no sole, standardized feminist school of thought to explain women issues hence the mixing of philosophies from different feminists as a theoretical framework for this study. Wooldridge (2015) notes that the post-structuralist feminist theory believes that power is universal and very dynamic and does not belong to one group of people. Similarly, in this study, I studied the discourse and power relations surrounding the educational leadership in order to establish what is most important in the lives and experiences of female school heads and to identify areas that need to be redefined. Radical feminists also believe that gender inequality is the foundation for all other practices of inequalities and opportunities (Vukoicic, 2017). In other words this might mean that all the other challenges experienced by female school heads in schools are anchored on gender inequalities that are still dominant in societies and not being addressed. To reduce the inequalities, Coleman (2012) suggests that for women to break through the “glass ceiling” they should be determined, dedicated, endure challenges and have a good network structure and also be given a platform to voice which is the aim of
this study. Five female school heads were given the opportunity to voice experiences of their first years as school heads and this will add social knowledge which cannot be measured objectively but subjectively by examining these women's unique experiences as school heads.

Another feminist theory used in this study is the Critical Feminist Theory which is a branch of critical theories that examine the relationship among groups through a gender lens (Rouleau-Carroll, 2014), including people's power relations in political, cultural, social, and economic issues. In addition, Rouleau-Carroll (2014) pointed out that critical theorists in qualitative research are most interested in matters of gender, race, and class because they consider these as the major means for differentiating power in communities. Therefore, this theory goes well with this qualitative research which explores the position of new and inexperienced female school heads in different contexts. We wish to use the theory to understand the social relationship that exists between the community and these new female heads. Furthermore, taking it from Ely et al. (2011), normally, the feminist theory provides an analysis of social relations and may focus on gender inequality and the promotion of women's rights, interests, and issues. Gender equality is more than equal representation; it is strongly tied to women's rights, and often requires policy changes. Rouleau-Carroll (2014) and Shava et al. (2019) added discrimination, stereotyping, objectification, patriarchy, and oppression as some of the themes explored by feminist theories. It is through such lens that we aim to determine the social relationship that exists between new and inexperienced female school heads and the community they operate in. For equality feminists, men and women are equal in terms of their ability to reason, achieve goals, and prosper in both the work and home front. The achievement of gender equality also requires the elimination of harmful practices against women and girls, such as discrimination, stereotyping, and other cultural beliefs and practices that are oppressive to women in addition to those suggested by Coleman (2012) in the paragraph above.

3. Methodology
In trying to understand other people's worlds, the researcher must get fully involved in their world and becomes a core creator of meanings by bringing their own background and personal experiences into the research (Babbie & Mouton, 2010). For example, our understanding of female school leadership matters assisted us in the interpretation of the place of female school heads in different communities. Such a point of departure helped us to choose a qualitative approach with an interpretivist paradigm. Using this approach, we acquired an in-depth understanding of female school heads’ stories, which Bryman (2012) described as understanding issues beneath surface appearance. This means that the focus is on studying a single person's stories, experiences, and meanings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Narrative research agrees with the feminist lens, which is after providing a voice for those who are seldom heard (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), hence the justification of this paper to let female school leaders voice their views and concerns about their leadership in different communities as women. Since case study research “does not claim any particular methods for data collection or data analysis” (Merriam, 1998, p. 28), various methods and methodologies can be employed to do case study research. Therefore, we opted for narrative inquiry as a tool for data collection and analysis. Narrative inquiry allows for focusing on the different stories we tell about our lives and share reflections on our experiences. This study analyses the place of female school heads in the communities through their told stories. In line with qualitative research, we opted to use a multiple case study design for this research. Multiple case studies resulted in detailed descriptions of the lived experiences of the female school heads, thus ensuring that the findings are credible. In addition, the first three participants, (those from the larger research), were interviewed face-to-face within the school premises, their working environment, where the participant felt comfortable, while the last two participants were interviewed telephonically because of COVID-19 restrictions. Cross-case analysis was done at the end because analytic conclusions from independent multiple cases are more powerful than from a single case alone, as observed by Yin (2014). A sample of five female school heads was purposively selected for their relevant knowledge on issues surrounding
women leadership. For ethical reasons codes (H1, H2, H3, H4, H5) were used to identify the participants. The data were collected after obtaining permission from the University of the Free State (UFS) and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary School Education (MoPSE) in Zimbabwe. Permission for data collection was granted after both the UFS and MoPSE were satisfied that ethical issues were fully observed and informed consent was also sought from the participants. The choice of interpretive paradigm and case study design assisted in our choice of an interview as a research instrument. However, the results from this research cannot be generalized because of the size of sample of the participants which was caused by the fact that there are still few female secondary school heads in the district and the few who got promoted are far from each other. The context of this research is given below.

4. Research context
This research was carried out in Zimbabwe a country in the Southern region of Africa. While Zimbabwe is an independent country politically there is still need for people to shift their mindset on issues that concern women. Zimbabwean societies are patriarchal in nature where men dominate and are expected to be leaders in different societal positions. Although the call for gender equality was preached worldwide Zimbabwe like most African countries still has a long way to go in terms of the recognition of women especially those in leadership positions. The five participants in this research come from different communities country wide but work in Gweru district as school heads. The selection of the new school heads within the education system is done at provincial level and there are ten provinces in Zimbabwe. New posts are advertised and are open to all who qualify but it is unfortunate that at times teachers get the information or the advertisements late because of the poor communication systems or because some heads just sit on the information to avoid competition or just for gate keeping. After interviews for the post the new school heads are posted anywhere within the country which led to some participants ended up working in difficulty communities. Below are the demographic data for the five participating female school heads.

4.1. Participants in brief
Five female school heads participated in this study. Three of the participants’ (H1, H2, and H3) narratives were drawn from a larger study carried out on the experiences of female secondary school heads in Gweru district, Zimbabwe. In addition, two new participants (H4 and H5) were involved in this research which focuses on the place of new and inexperienced female school heads. For their first appointments, H1 and H2 headed urban schools, while H3, H4, and H5 were rural school heads. It is the focus of this study to find out how different people receive and interact with new female school heads in their communities.

Participants’ demographic data

| Code   | Age (years) | Marital status | Years of experience as school head | Location of school |
|--------|-------------|----------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------|
| H1     | 53          | Married        | 23                                | Urban             |
| H2     | 52          | Married        | 11                                | Urban             |
| H3     | 50          | Widow          | 11                                | Rural             |
| H4     | 40          | Single         | 5                                 | Rural             |
| H5     | 37          | Married        | 3                                 | Peri-urban        |

Source: Primary data
5. Women’s stories

5.1. Case 1
"When I got the post of school head after my first application, I felt very nervous, I did not know whether I should accept or turn it down. It was my husband who encouraged me. I was introduced to the deputy head first, then to the rest of the school, including the School Development Association (SDA). No one showed that excitement I expected, and it really affected my confidence, I lost my grip. To tell the truth, it was all because of lack of training to be leaders. If only we were trained, I think we would have been in a better position. It was easy for me when I acted as deputy head, because the head was always there and did most of the work and I was running the non-teaching department most of the time, and now standing on my own was a challenge.

I had my first experience as a school head at a well-known school which was named after a certain government minister in Chitungwiza (a small town about 30 km from the city of Harare). The local community of that school was known to be unfriendly to the school heads that had been there before me. I heard that if the community did not like the school head, they would open the school-garden gate and drive their goats in just to provoke the school head. The goats would eat all the green vegetables. That really scared me.

The community was known to be very hostile; they would throw school heads out of the offices and lock [office doors]. My father, being a former town clerk of that place, had a clear history about the school, so he encouraged me to stand firm, of which I did. I was very timid and afraid of everyone, including the deputy head that happened to be so unkind to me. I would go back home miserable every day and at times I would cry behind closed and locked doors. This went on for some time until I moved from Harare to reside at the school with most of my staff members, and things began to change for the better. I remember at one time when almost all the staff members' houses were broken into during the weekend. It caused a lot of commotion at the school, as people tried to rationalize on why mine and a few others were the only ones left. It was not easy for me to prove my innocence before the staff members. I really worked hard to get the trust back. Although things changed with time, I never enjoyed those early years of my new career as a school head.

On the other hand, the area Education Officer (EO) used to call the young school heads, including males, by their first names during meetings. There were only three female secondary heads in the district then, and we would be assigned to do catering duties or writing minutes during the meetings. There were quite a number of male school heads, who were even younger than us, who were attending the meetings while our duty was to make sure that the EO and other male counterparts were comfortable during the meetings' deliberations in terms of food. Just because we were new, young, and also excited that we were some of the few female secondary school heads, we did not mind at all and thought we were being favored and noticed by the EO. It is only after some years that I realized that, “No, we were just being taken as placeholders in those schools,” because most of the time we were told what to do by those authorities. There were quite a number of things that we were not allowed to implement or make decisions on unless authorized by the EO of the area.”

5.2. Case 2
When I first went to my first school as a head, I was introduced by the District Education Officer (DEO) of the area. During meetings, both the teachers and the parents were always comparing me with the former head, who was also a lady. You would hear teachers saying, “... during Mrs X's (name provided) leadership we were doing it like this and the results were good.” Also, in SDA meetings, parents would tell you what they had agreed on with Mrs X on certain issues and it would be very difficult to move them from there. I am someone who is a bit soft and most stakeholders might have taken it as a weakness. In addition, I had disciplinary problems with teachers, students, and even non-academic staff. If I call for a meeting, only a handful of parents
would attend and even some teachers would give lame excuses so as to absent themselves. It was a difficult year for me and because the school was in the urban area, the regional inspectorate team was always at my school. I felt so suffocated and could not experiment anything because it was one guideline after the other. It took time for them to stop the frequent visits.

“At times, the students would bring drugs and dangerous weapons to school, such as small knives and razor blades. The staff members tried hard to control them, though it was not easy with these many students from high-density neighborhoods. The problem was that the community seemed not to care much, although a few would come to school when called and ask us to discipline the learners. The majority of the parents would tell us that it was part of the children's growing up and they would grow out of it. During meetings, some parents would just say things without addressing me, but I could see the difference if the meetings were being chaired by the deputy. It was only good that the deputy had my back always. He would advise me on many school issues, since he was seasoned as a deputy head. Many times, he would chair ‘hot’ issues, those that we knew would raise flares. To be honest, he was respected more than me, but that changed when he got promoted and left the school. After appointing a new deputy head, they had no choice except to come to me for any school issues; then we started working together collectively. That is when I also started realizing my own capabilities as a school leader”.

5.3. Case 3

“In 2005/2006, most school heads left their posts, maybe because of economic challenges. These included most of the young men who had been placed in new secondary schools which mushroomed, especially after the Land Reform Programme. That was the time I applied for headship and succeeded as an acting head at a certain rural secondary school which was not very far from where I was as a deputy head. No training was given to new heads. Before, I did not mind, because I was comfortably rallying behind the school head. Now that I was on my own, I felt I needed training. I worked for a short period of time before substantive head posts were advertised”.

“After I applied for a substantive post, I was called for an interview, which was very difficult. The nature of that interview affected me [so] that I fell sick and took some off days from work. I recall that there were only two interviewees, a certain gentleman and myself. I was the one who got the post as substantive head of a school in the same area, and the economic situation had improved by that time. Some teachers from other schools who did not even apply for the post talked bad things about my promotion, such as ‘It was obvious that you would get the post because you are not married; those people don’t promote married women because they know that they get nothing in return’. That statement really got into my nerves. However, the parents of that particular school applauded the ministry for appointing me as substantive head. I think it was because they believed that ladies were there to develop schools (laughing). Parents would come to the office in their numbers for assistance. We would work together even on the disciplining of learners. I got all the respect and support from the teachers and community and even the other male school heads were very helpful and always encouraged me since we had worked together for over three years being the only female head”.

“Even the EO did not seem to trust me with the school, I am sure, regardless of the fact that I was an acting head for over a year. He started lecturing to me about things to do and not to do and did not give me room to initiate. While I was still being stressed by the demands of this new job, just after a few months, a supervisor was sent to my school. The report I got even surprised me, it was good, maybe because the supervisor was a lady. She was good and very helpful in a number of areas. I am widowed and because of that I found it not easy to seek advice from male authorities in case I would be misunderstood. So, I felt very free to talk to this particular supervisor, who advised me accordingly. I think the authorities were after ‘witch hunting’, because I got two more visits after the first one and those authorities were males. It was good that my teachers were very cooperative and supportive and that everything was found to be going smoothly. Although their reports were not as good as the first one, they were quite fair. I ended up asking the other
school heads about the visits, but to my surprise, all my neighboring schools were not inspected and yet two heads of the other schools were equally new. The few challenges I got during my first years as school head strengthened me in my career and gave me the courage to apply to lead a bigger school. Although I am enjoying leadership and proud to be one of the first few female school leaders in the district, there is need for people to be trained for this job. It is not an easy job, because a lot is involved, for instance, school finances. Some of us did not have any accounting background and you will just be at the mercy of the school clerk (laughing). The areas to be covered in the school administration are too many to be learnt through discovery”.

5.4. Case 4

“I was introduced to the school by the DEO of that area and later to the traditional leaders by the deputy head. I worked for five years at that first school. People in that community had mixed feelings about me. Some showed respect by consulting me on school issues, while others preferred to go to the deputy head. At first, I thought maybe it was because I was still new and they were used to the deputy head, who acted as school head before my appointment, but in some cases this went on until my transfer from that school. I remember one occasion when we attended one of our learner’s funeral. It did not go well with me when the deputy head was asked to give a speech without even consulting me and it was as if I was not even there. To them, I am sure I was just like an outsider within their community. In annual general meetings, most of the parents would direct their questions to the deputy even if I would be the one chairing. Most of the times, the deputy would ask me to come in, something I did not like”.

“At one point, one of the parents asked me how school heads are appointed, and I questioned him why he asked. He just said he thought they were posted to their home areas. I later found out that the question was not genuine, because even the previous head was not from that community, although I don’t know up to date why he was transferred to even a smaller school within the same district. It was worse when they discovered that I was single. I got some annoying comments, such as ‘Isn’t this post too much for you since you are to attend to your children’s issues all by yourself? At least Mr X (name provided) had a family.’ Many times, I would lock myself up in the office and cry out my emotions. I didn’t want people to judge me as weak. This was a good therapy for me, and even now I sometimes do it. After that, I would gather myself up and move forward. One thing I will never do is to cry in front of anyone. Although I spent a number of years heading that particular school, it was not easy for me to be part of the community”.

“I think things were worse because I am an Anglican working in a Seventh Day Adventist community and they would expect me to join them at their church gatherings on Saturdays, something I did not do, because I would make sure most weekends I travel as a way of avoiding this clash with the community. This is one of the latent motives why I transferred from that school, although I gave distance from family as the reason. Now that I am mature and seasoned, I see these as small challenges, because I discovered that there are bigger issues connected to female school leadership than I thought. It will take me months to explain what I went through to be where I am today (laughing). Another thing was, we were never trained for this job and those who are getting in these days are better off because there are universities that offer leadership courses, but not everyone has the money to go for those degrees”.

5.5. Case 5

“My promotion issues first started in the family, where almost everyone was against it. The moment I mentioned the intent to apply for promotion to my husband, it became an issue, worse off my in-laws. My mother-in-law was very mean. I did not care much about her, but had to convince my husband to agree to my intentions. It was after being promoted to head of our local school that my mother-in-law changed her attitude towards me. She and all the other family members gave me a lot of respect and I was surprised by the sudden change. I was introduced to the school development committee and staff by the deputy head, who was acting as school head
two weeks before another formal introduction was done by the DEO. I was received by the community with a goat (giggling), which was slaughtered and eaten by all staff members”.

“When we call for meetings, my mother-in-law would even encourage people to come for general meetings at school. Some community members were now using her to negotiate for fees payment, such as paying after harvesting. However, I would always refer them to the deputy head, because I wanted to separate work issues from family ones. I got a lot of support from that close-knit community and the school staff. Whenever I go for community occasions, I would make sure I had a prepared speech, because they would ask me to say something every time. On every occasion when they need the school’s participation, the traditional leaders would send a word in advance. Although I was still young and inexperienced, I really enjoyed my new post. The confidence I built during those early years of leadership helped and pushed me to be promoted to a much bigger peri-urban school where I am today. However, I have the opinion that new school heads should be attached to a seasoned one before taking over, since there is no proper training being given to new appointees. Yes, development workshops are now being done, but I feel it is not enough, because there are many challenges school heads face in their positions as leaders which need leadership professional knowledge”.

6. Cross-analysis of the findings and discussions
The five participants in this research raised a number of issues as challenges in their early years of leadership. However, some interesting findings from rural and urban school leadership were revealed by the participants. In general, it seems three participants (H1, H2, and H3) faced more challenges than the other two (H4 and H5). Looking at their contexts, H1 and H2 were married and heading schools in urban areas, while H3, H4, and H5 were in rural areas. H3 was a widow heading in a community where she started teaching after completing her teaching course, while H5 was married and heading a school in her home area. H4 was single and heading in a community that was not her own.

According to the findings, it seems these different contexts and statuses contributed a lot to how some of the participants were perceived by the communities where they were posted. This is in line with Critical Feminist Theory, which examines the connection among groups through a gender lens (Rouleau-Carroll, 2014), including people’s power relations in political, cultural, social, and economic issues. Although all of the participants were introduced by EOs, which showed the importance of the post, they were received differently by the staff and community. Diko (2014) emphasized that although women are appointed to high positions, the contexts in which they operate are not adjusted to accommodate them. While gender seems to be catered for now in leadership posts, it is still clear that women cruise a more complicated web of challenges than men do in their leadership expeditions. This paper looks at some of the community-based challenges that inexperienced and newly appointed female school heads face at the beginning of their leadership journeys. The question we seek answers to is how communities treat or perceive new female heads posted in their schools, since some research has revealed that people have an instinctive culturally masculine concept of leaders (Ndlovu & Proches, 2019). It is our focus to find out whether new and inexperienced female school leaders are perceived as just ordinary females or actual leaders by the communities they work in.

On the one hand, for participants H1, H2, and H4, the welcome was not as they had expected. Different attitudes were shown by both the staff members and parents. H1’s fears were even increased by the stories that were told about how the community had treated other school heads who served before her. These three participants indicated that it was not easy for them to get along with the communities at first. However, Barnett (2004) believed that though the attitudes of people are shifting toward the expanded social roles of women, a lot still needs to be done to the people’s perceptions and beliefs in terms of women’s responsibilities in society.

On the other hand, the welcome for H3 and H5 was more pronounced and evidenced by gifts, such as a goat for H5. It seems the communities were happy to have such leaders in their areas.
What is not clear is whether they were happy because of the participants’ gender, since they were successors of male heads, or because they were already known to them. Still on this finding, it seems hard for single women to work in communities that are not their own. It is unfortunate that we failed to get a participant who is single and worked in her home area, for comparison. In any case, the results at hand show that one of the reasons why H4 was not welcome was because she was single and had children. This was revealed from the questions she received from some parents, who openly asked how she managed work and family load since she was single. Basing their argument on role congruity theory and the lack of a fit model, Eagly and Carli (2007) concurred that prejudice against female leaders arises from the contradictory expectations between the female gender role and the leader role. Though Msila (2013) observed that women taking up very high posts are more likely to be single parents and less likely to be married and have children than men, this is not the case with the five participants in this study, because three were married and one widowed, with only one being single.

Even though H3 was also not married, she seemed not to have received similar comments from the community, but from some of the teachers, who had remarked that she was promoted because she was not married. From an ubuntu point of view, perhaps the community felt sorry for H3 since she had had no one to help her because her husband had passed away, unlike H4, who had never been married. Although H3 was a widow, she also indicated that she was not comfortable asking male authorities for assistance, and clearly stated that she could be misconstrued if she did that. This is in line with Makura (2009), who indicated that when single women seek help from men, they tend to be misunderstood by both the men and the community. This shows that even women themselves know that being single is not a status that is welcomed by society. However, we noted that those participants who were posted in rural areas were better placed in terms of welcoming than those who were promoted to urban schools, although there was a difference in the way those posted to rural schools were welcomed. For instance, among the participants, H5 was the most welcomed head by her home community. As for the community’s attitude, Sherman (2005) highlighted that some communities seem to support their own people only and those from outside have to work very hard to gain their favor.

Although H5 was warmly welcomed by the community, she raised a very interesting observation about something that she had experienced after being promoted to her local school. Her mother-in-law’s attitude toward her changed from negative to positive only after her promotion, and she even assisted in her career as a school head. Such findings therefore seem to reveal that some married women manage to get respect from their families only when they attain a higher position in society. However, this might not be the case with all women in leadership, as the other participants did not raise it. Here, it shows that women need family support in their career as school leaders. Lack of family support is one of the barriers indicated by most feminists as a hindrance for women’s progression to success (Greyling & Steyn, 2015; Ndlovu & Proches, 2019; Perkins, 2011).

In the narratives above, two of the participants (H1 and H4) specified that they used to cry behind closed doors when frustration was too much for them, H1 saying it was therapeutic for her. The findings seem to show a lot of frustration in women leadership, which was also indicated by H4, who said that she could not explain what she went through. Such incidences make the issue of gender discrimination a complex and emotional one. Coleman (2012) mentioned that if a person is unable to manage stress, he or she may suffer from a loss of confidence, identity, affection, and sense of control. Through this, they may be led to that believe they are alone, unwanted or unimportant, and incapable of overcoming difficulties or succeeding. Such thoughts lead to anxiety, anger, depression, and illness. This shows that bigger issues could not be seen by the eye that female leaders shoulder in their journey as female heads. Gender and culture are believed to profoundly affect leadership in various complex ways (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). Some participants indicated that they release their emotions through crying, a method to calm themselves down. All the participants showed that they got some of the frustration from the DEO/EO’s school
inspections, which were done quite often. These inspections showed that although these women were in leadership positions, the power and authority remained with males in senior ranks, as observed by Coleman (2012). Even though they felt it was not fair and too much, quitting was not an option for them.

The reflections show that the authorities had a trend to visit new female school heads more frequently than their male counterparts. H3 aired that maybe it was because they did not trust women when it came to leadership. Similarly, Makhasane et al. (2018) and Msila (2013) emphasized that good and effective leadership was associated more with masculinity than femininity for many years. In other words, although the participants were selected to run the schools, it looks like the actual control of the school administration rested with the higher authorities. H1 indicated that they were tasked to cook for the participants during meetings. This was also observed by Makura (2009), who noted that the meetings were described as being very male-oriented and top down and nothing more than a dissemination of information. In addition, Kiamba (2008) revealed that in many institutions, most women were just ushered into leadership positions because of policies that were put in place by different governments. This could be the reason why the authorities were going for the mentioned inspections and, therefore, Harris and Heimerer (2020) conclusion that leadership is not easy for most women. According to Chabaya et al. (2009), the ushering in of women leaders was caused by the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. This led to the passing of new policies and laws on the promotion of women to higher posts, as indicated before.

A number of the participants indicated that there was need for training new school heads before they started their leadership journey. For example, H5 said that although she did not get resistance from the community, there was more to leadership than just the warm welcome from the community, hence there was a need for new heads to get trained before they started their duties. Daresh (2004) emphasized that those who aspire to be in leadership positions need good mentors and be involved in formal organizational leadership programs. Leadership and self-esteem training has been suggested to empower women with relevant skills for leadership (United Nations, 1995). Furthermore, emphasizing the lack of empowerment, Perkins (2011) added that while men are exposed to the “old boys” network, women seem not to have good platforms for leadership preparation. In addition to training, one participant suggested that new heads should be attached to seasoned ones for a certain period before executing the new duties. This is probably in regard to new heads gaining confidence and familiarizing themselves with the demands of the new job. This aspect was observed by Chabaya et al. (2009) through their research in Zimbabwe, where they concluded that women lack self-confidence and have low self-esteem. They believed that this is the reason why most women do not apply for high managerial posts in schools.

Another thought-provoking point observed in the narratives is that those participants (H3 and H5) who were welcomed by the communities seemed to be talking only about themselves with excitement and not about their teachers or deputy heads. While, on the other hand, H1, H2, and H4 explained their relationship with their deputy heads, it is not always the case that where the head seems to be conflicting with the community, the deputy head is supportive. H1’s deputy head seemed not to like her, but H2’s deputy head was supportive and would give advice on school issues. This also shows that H2 wanted the deputy’s assistance when it comes to sensitive school issues and even on disciplining of students from the high-density suburbs. Problems associated with such schools were also highlighted by Giddens and Sutton (2013), who argued that schools that are located in high-density neighborhoods are likely to face more discipline problems than those in low-density neighborhoods. On the other hand, H4 seemed not to like the deputy herself. This is seen from the way she narrated incidences where the deputy had taken the lead disregarding her presence and how she rearranged things after his transfer. It seems she only got recognition from the community after he had gone, not necessarily because they liked her, but because they had nowhere else to go with their issues.
Another finding from the narratives was that the urban heads were always being compared with previous heads. This seems to be the trend if the community did not like the particular head in their school. H4, who was heading in a rural setup and also did not receive a warm welcome from the community, experienced this comparison when a parent said that Mr X (previous head) was better because he had had a family, and it seems that to them a family was composed of a father, mother, and children. Therefore, H4 was perceived as not being a complete family. Rouleau-Carroll (2014) added discrimination, stereotyping, objectification, patriarchy, and oppression as some of the themes explored by feminist theories. The attitude of the community, in this case, shows that they did not expect someone who was single to lead a school, because of some negative stereotypes they had about single women, thus making life difficult for single female school leaders.

Furthermore, a finding was also made concerning religious affiliation. H4 indicated that she was not comfortable working in a community whose religious affiliation was different from hers. The community expected her to join their church gatherings. Maintaining that same line of argument, Blackmore (2013) and Nicholson and Kurucz (2019) claimed that women’s images and practices as leaders are informed by perceptions that are shaped by cultural and religious expectations. We can conclude that it is not easy for school heads to lead in communities with different beliefs from theirs. This might not be the case with ordinary teachers, because heads are representatives of schools. In religious schools, women administrators are very few, because of the traditional way of defining women’s gender identity, which excludes them from “masculine” jobs, such as administrative roles (Moore, 2003). However, some of the participants voiced the joy and pride they got from their early years of leadership. This was also observed by Perkins (2011), who indicated that some women expressed happiness in their careers as school heads because they were free to lead as women and did not have to adopt the role of headmaster (male stereotype of leadership).

7. Conclusion
The achievement of gender equality also requires the elimination of harmful practices against women and girls, such as discrimination, stereotyping, and other cultural beliefs and practices that are oppressive to women. Female school heads need the respect they deserve as leaders from both the organization and the community. The data from the participants revealed that some female school leaders are not welcome in the communities where they are posted. It seems the challenges that the participants faced were based on school location, marital status, gender, religious affiliation, lack of training in leadership, and lack of community support. Female school heads’ careers could change and become more enjoyable if these issues are addressed. This could be employed if, for instance, new heads could get trained before resuming their new posts or even for some time be attached to those who are already in practice. To start with, new female school heads could be deployed in their home areas for them to gain confidence and become major players in this unfamiliar game. Most of these observations are consolidation of the feminist ideas about women in leadership positions which is an addition to existing knowledge. Also, family and community support and respect are necessary for newly appointed female heads. Therefore, it can be concluded that besides the improvement on women leadership representation in the education sector in Zimbabwe, there are still many gaps that need to be addressed for female heads to be fully recognized as leaders in schools and communities.

Funding
The authors received no direct funding for this research.

Author details
Cynthia Dzimiri
E-mail: cynthia.dzimiri@gmail.com
Loyiso C. Jita
1 Office of the Dean, Faculty of Education, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Citation information
Cite this article as: Outsiders inside: The place of new, inexperienced female school heads in the community, Cynthia Dzimiri & Loyiso C. Jita, Cogent Social Sciences (2022), 8: 2085358.
References

Ayman, R., & Korabik, K. (2010). Leadership: Why gender and culture matter. American Psychologist, 65(3), 157–170. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018806

Bobbie, E., & Mouton, J. (2010). The practice of social research (10th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Barnett, R. C. (2004). Preface: Women and work: Where are we, where did we come from, and where are we going? Journal of Social Issues, 60(4), 667–674. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-4537.2004.00378.x

Bass, L. (2009). Fostering an ethic of care in leadership: A conversation with five African American women. Advances in Developing Human Resources, 11(5), 619–632. https://doi.org/10.1177/1523423009352075

Blackmore, J. (2013). A feminist critical perspective on educational leadership. International Journal of Leadership in Education, 16(2), 139–154. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2012.754057

Bryman, J. (2012). Social research methods (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Chabaya, O., Rembe, S., & Wodesango, N. (2009). The persistence of gender inequality in Zimbabwe: Factors that impede the advancement of women into leadership positions in primary schools. South African Journal of Education, 29(2), 235–251. https://doi.org/10.15700/soje.v29n2a25

Chilyori, A., Chikwatire, W., & Oyedele, V. (2018). Problem encountered in feminine school primary headship in Mangwe in Mutare district. Journal of Social Science Research, 13, 2843–2860. https://doi.org/10.24297/jssr.v13i0.7925

Coleman, M. (2012). Leadership and diversity. Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 40(5), 592–609. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143212451174

Crossman, A. (2020). Feminist theory in sociology: An overview of key ideas and issues. ThoughtCo. Feb. 16, 2021. thoughtco.com/feminist-theory-3026624.

Daresh, J. (2006). Mentoring school leaders: Professional promise or predictable problems? Educational Administration Quarterly, 40(4), 495–517. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085906288180

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). The Sage handbook of qualitative research. Sage.

Diko, N. (2014). Women in educational leadership: The case of hope high school in the Eastern Cape province, South Africa. Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 42(6), 825–834. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143214537228

Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L. (2007). Through the labyrinth: The truth about how women become leaders. Harvard Business School Press.

Ely, R. J., Ibarra, H., & Kolb, D. M. (2011). Taking gender into account: Theory and design for women’s leadership development programs. Academy of Management Learning and Education, 10(3), 474–493.

Giddens, A., & Sutton, P. W. (2013). Sociology. John Wiley. Greyling, S. C. M., & Steyn, G. M. (2015). The challenges facing women aspiring for school leadership positions in South African primary schools. Gender & Behaviour, 13(1), 6607–6620. https://www.ajol.info/index.php/gab/article/view/119102

Grogan, M., & Sherman, W. H. (2010). Conclusion: Women around the world reshaping leadership for education. Journal of Educational Administration, 48(6), 782–786. https://doi.org/10.1108/09578231011079629

Harris, L. U., & Heimerer, S. (2020). Women in education management in Kosovo: A hard road less travelled.

Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies, 9(1), 136–147. https://doi.org/10.36941/ajis-2020-0012

Kiamba, J. M. (2008). Women and leadership positions: Social and cultural barriers to success. Wagadu, 6 (Winter), 7–26.

Molahse, S. (1997). The careers of women teachers under apartheid. SAPES.

Makosane, D. S., Simamane, L. R., & Chikoko, V. (2018). Thinking and acting outside the box: A woman principal’s lived experiences of starting and leading a school. In V. Chikoko (Ed.), Leadership that works in deprived school contexts of South Africa (pp. 59–76). Nova Science Publishers.

Makura, A. H. (2009). The challenges faced by female primary school heads: The Zimbabwean experience (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis). University of Fort Hare.

Merriam, S. B. (1990). Qualitative research and case study applications. Jossey-Bass. Mogadime, D., Mentz, P. J., Armstrong, D. E., & Holm, B. (2010). Constructing self as leader: Case studies of women who are change agents in South Africa urban education. Journal of Black Studies, 45(6), 797–821. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085910384203

Moore, H. (2003). Feminism and anthropology. Polity Press.

Msila, V. (2013). Obstacles and opportunities in women school leadership: A literature study. South African Journal of Education, 5(4), 463–470. https://doi.org/10.1080/09751221.2013.1189010

Ndlovu, T. P., & Proches, C. G. (2019). Leadership challenges facing female school principals in the Durban INK area. Gender & Behaviour, 17(2), 12859–12871. https://www.ajol.info/index.php/gab/article/view/188002

Nicholson, J., & Kurucz, E. (2019). Relational leadership for sustainability: Building an ethical framework from the moral theory of ‘Ethics of Care’. Journal of Business Ethics, 156(1), 25–43. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-017-3593-4

Perkins, K. (2011). A case study of women educational administrators and their perspectives on work and life roles (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis). University of South. Rouleau-Carroll, L. (2014). Attributes and characteristics that contribute to successful female leadership in secondary education. Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. Order No. 3615852

Shava, G. N., Tlou, F. N., & Mphau, M. (2019). Challenges facing women in school leadership positions: Experiences from a district in Zimbabwe. Journal of Education and Practice, 10(14), 30–40. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339062493_Challenges_Facing_Women_in_School_Leadership_Positions_Experiences_from_a_District_in_Zimbabwe

Shava, G. N., Chosa, T., Tlou, F. N., & Mathonsi, E. (2021). Leadership and gender, women management: The social realist analytical theoretical view point. International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS) V V, 94–101. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352282472_Leadership_and_Gender_women_management_the_social_realist_analytical_theoretical_view_point

Sherman, W. H. (2005). Preserving the status quo or renegotiating leadership: Women’s experiences with a district-based aspiring leaders program. Educational Administration Quarterly, 41(5), 707–740. https://doi.org/10.1177/00420859050279548

Smith, J. (2015). Gendered trends in student teachers’ professional aspirations. Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 43(6), 861–882. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143214543200
Smith, S. (2018). Feminism in international relations theory. E-International Relations Students. 62-68. www.e-ir-info/2018/01/04/feminism-in-international-relations-theory/  
Stead, V. (2013). Learning to deploy (in)visibility: An examination of women leaders’ lived experiences. Management Learning, 44(1), 63–79. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507612470603  
United Nations. (1995). Report of the fourth world conference on Women, Beijing, China, 4-15 September 1995. https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/Beijing%20full%20report%20E.pdf  

Vukoicic, J. (2017). Radical feminism as a discourse in the theory of conflict: Sociological discourse. Alford.  
Weedon, C. (1997). Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory (2nd Cambridge, MA:Blackwell.  
Wooldridge, M. 2015. Post structuralism and feminism: The interplays between gender, language and power. E-international relations students www.e-ir.info/2015/05/22/poststructuralism-and-feminism-the-interplay-between_gender-language-power  
Yin, R. K. (2014). Case study research: Design and methods. Sage.
