

Navigation Strategies by Women into Decision-Making Positions in the Ministry of Education, Zambia

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to explore the strategies navigated by women employees in the ministry of Education in Decision-Making positions. The objective of the study was to propose strategies that women can use to navigate into being appointed in leadership positions. This study employed a qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth interviews with fifteen (15) women in leadership roles in the Ministry of Education. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring diversity in age, ethnicity, and position. The data collected from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. As such, the study found that women are using various strategies to navigate different challenges, such as building strong networks, seeking mentorship, and developing their leadership skills. It also suggested that women's success in these roles is contingent on addressing gender-based biases and stereotypes, promoting work-life balance, and providing access to mentoring and leadership development programs. The study recommends that organizations should strive to challenge and change gender stereotypes that limit women's leadership opportunities. Organizations should provide women with access to mentorship and sponsorship programs that help them develop leadership skills and provide them with career guidance. Organizations should offer training and development opportunities that help women build the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in decision-making roles. Equally, that organizations should create a culture that values diversity and inclusion, where everyone's contributions are respected and appreciated. Women should be encouraged to network and build relationships with colleagues and leaders in their field.

Keywords: Decision-Making, Leadership Styles, Navigate, Networking, Mentorship, Strategies.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Globally, women's equal participation and leadership in decision-making processes at every level of the organisations and in every sector is a fundamental reduce attempt to reduce gender-based poverty. As at now the issue is that women presence in significant numbers in elected bodies and in economic institutions can result in more equitable policy outcomes. This is because their bigger numbers are likely to encourage policy makers to give more attention to issues affecting them such as equal pay, childcare, violence against women, and unpaid labour. While having more women in leadership positions does not guarantee women's concerns will be on the agenda, quest to equality in decision making is discussed in this article, Amanda and Hennie (2007) have affirmed the evidence of direct correlation to women participation in decision making and the promotion.

In addition, not only are women's participation and leadership position an essential element poverty alleviation and tackling gender inequality, but it is also a basic human right. According to the Gender in Development Division (2000), Gender Equality report, International human-rights treaties and conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action, and the fifth Sustainable Development Goal on gender equality, recognise that women have the right to participate equally with men at all levels and in all aspects of public life and decision-making, whether it is deciding how the household income is spent or determining how the country is run, and such conventions commit signatories to realising this goal. Women have greatly contributed to human civilization despite the difficulties they have faced in many cultures that have considered them to be back benchers when it comes to decision making and in leadership at large. In many situations women

face challenges that deny them to reach their leadership potential, such as discrimination, prejudice, stereotype and sexual harassment as compared to their male counterpart.

In recent years, Zambia has made steady progress in terms of women leadership in education, sports, military, finance, engineering, and politics. Furthermore, in our Zambian history women have exhibited unique leadership skills such as Chieftainess Waitwika of the Namwanga tribe, Lenshina of the Lumpa church and women revolutionary led by Mama Kankasa in the struggle for independence. Therefore, this study looks at the strategies that women in leadership have used to navigate into top positions.

For a number of years, so many leadership positions that women can lead have only been given to men. For this cause the potential in women leadership has not been fully explored. Despite challenges, some women in the Ministry of Education have navigated themselves into leadership positions, and little research has been done on how these women overcome challenges as they navigate themselves in decision making positions. As, this research intends to explore how women navigate themselves into decision making positions in the education system.

II. THEORETICAL AND LITERATURE REVIEWED

As such, in this research, the researcher adopted a theory that emerged out of Danish economists Esther Boserup's work called "Women in Development theory (WID)." This theory sought to question existing theories of development by contesting that economic development had identical impacts on men and women. The Women in Development theory was driven by the resurgence of women's movements in developed countries, and particularly through liberal feminists striving for equal rights and labour opportunities in the United States. Henderson (2004) points out that the WID theory stresses the need for women to play a greater role in the development process. According to this perspective, women's active involvement in policymaking will lead to more successful policies overall.

As part of the strategies that can be employed in promoting women leadership in the world today, Hoel (2008) points out that Legislative reform in the political sphere is vital; in that the way elections are organised and run, especially in the selection of candidates, presents women with particular problems, whether this is getting selected for a constituency-based election or appearing on a party list of candidates. In addition, policies of decentralisation have been of particular significance in increasing women's representation at the local level (Mulenga-Hagane *et al.*, 2020). These give local and regional governments (rather than central government) the power to make decisions about local services, such as health, education, and sanitation. Because it is often easier for women to get elected at local level than at national level, decentralisation can give women real influence over decisions that will have a direct impact on the lives of members of their communities. In recognition of this, the introduction of decentralisation policies in Cambodia and Sierra Leone prompted Oxfam and its partners to give support to women standing for election to local government (Chaudhry & Javed, 2012).

According to Johns (2013) changing attitudes to women's leadership and participation is another strategy that can be employed. Musa posits that traditional attitudes and beliefs about women's role in society continue to prejudice both men's and women's preconceptions regarding women's ability to participate fully in public life. These attitudes include stereotypes about women being dependent, unskilled, and not suitable for institutional leadership and strategic decision-making.

In the UK, women participating in training to encourage economic and political participation and empowerment did not really have any sense of shared solidarity as women. It was only through meeting women from other parts of the country, and identifying and discussing common problems that they faced, that the participants came to realise that in fact, as women, they did face many of the same issues, and that many of these were the result of gender inequality and stereotypes regarding acceptable masculine and feminine behaviour.

Furthermore, as a strategy, addressing inequalities of wealth and power at every level, from the household to national government, unequal power relations impact on women's ability to participate fully in public life, and to attain positions of leadership is vital. In addition, there is also need of encouraging and supporting women to take up and be effective in leadership roles. Thus, providing targeted training to women who want to assume positions of leadership is one way of enabling more women to influence decision-making processes. Several of the papers give examples of women wishing to stand for election being provided with training that included, according to context, leadership and campaign skills, knowledge of political systems and structures, and how to develop and propose agendas that uphold women's rights. Activities also included legal-rights education or voter awareness raising around elections, mobilising women to vote in elections and to hold elected representatives to account (Ngcobo, 2016). Such campaigns are often vital in contexts where poor women in particular may have little awareness of their rights as voters and as citizens. Due to lack of literacy skills and their exclusion from channels of information, they may not have any way of finding out about these rights for themselves.

In the Women in Leadership Project (WIL), the first stage is on promoting women's political participation and leadership in Sierra Leone, emphasis was placed on preparing women (most of whom came from poor backgrounds and had no experience of formal leadership positions) for election. Once elected, many women councilors felt overwhelmed by and ill-equipped for the duties that they were now expected to undertake, often as a result of poor literacy skills, particularly when it came to working in English. So, in the second stage of this work, the Promoting a Culture of Equal Representation (PACER) project, ongoing mentoring support is being offered to women councilors and members of Parliament, to help them to be more effective in their roles. Most of the strategies highlighted by many scholars have been in other sectors and not in the public sector especially the Ministry of Education which this study will focus on.

III. METHODOLOGY

In this study, the researchers employed a case study research design. According to Babbie and Mouton (2006) and Chipindi *et al.* (2021) stated that a case study is a detailed study of a specific subject, such as a person, group, place, event, organization, or phenomenon. Case studies are commonly used in social, educational, clinical, and business research. Although quantitative methods are occasionally utilized, qualitative methods are typically used in case study research designs. The researcher desired to learn more specifically, contextually, in-depth information about the strategies women use to navigate challenges in decision-making positions.

The target population for this study were women in the offices of authority in Lusaka, Zambia and other women who hold or have held managerial-level or higher advanced professional leadership positions in government positions in the Ministry of Education. In this study, the sample will consist of three (3) key informants at Ministry of Education Headquarters, three (3) key informants at Provincial Education Office, three (3) key informants at the District Education Board Secretary's office and Six (6) Head and Deputy Head Teachers in selected secondary schools in Lusaka district. In total, the sample will comprise of fifteen (15) respondents. The researcher used purposive sampling technique in selecting the study sample. The main instrument for data collection in this study is the semi structured interview guide.

However, fifteen (15) research respondents who were engaged were women at different positions and different schools and were from different backgrounds. Interviews were first done with the Deputy heads and School head teachers followed by the District Education Board Secretaries and finally information shall be collected from those at Ministry of Education Headquarters so as to verify all other information. In terms of data analysis, the researcher used thematic analysis as it looks at patterns of meaning in a data set. The data was presented using simple descriptive statistic methods including tables and pie charts. In the process off data collection, ethical issues are highly recommended. The researcher will maintain a high level of confidentiality and legality. In addition, all respondents shall be informed how long it will take to conduct the interview and that interviews shall be held at participants' convenient place and time. The researcher obtained their informed consent in writing.

IV. PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

This article presents data based on major results of descriptive information derived from interviews from fifteen (15) women in leadership positions in the Education sector in Lusaka ranging from women head teachers, District education board officers, provincial education board officer and officers at the ministry of education headquarter.

A. *Strategies that Women use to Navigate into being appointed in Leadership Positions*

According to our findings on the strategies women can use to be appointed in leadership positions, the majority of our respondents mentioned that there is need one upgrading their education qualifications. One shouldn't expect to be promoted if they have the lowest qualification in an institution so there is need to upgrade educational qualifications. The other strategies as pointed out by the respondents include practising resilience in the workplace, being innovative and creative, being skillful, embracing hard work and determination and other strategies too.

B. *Measures to put in Place to ensure that Women are appointed in Leadership Positions*

The bar chart above shows responses from the participants on the measures that the government of the republic of Zambia has put in place to promote women leadership. According to the findings, some respondents mentioned that government has introduced policies that promote gender equity and equality in the workplace.

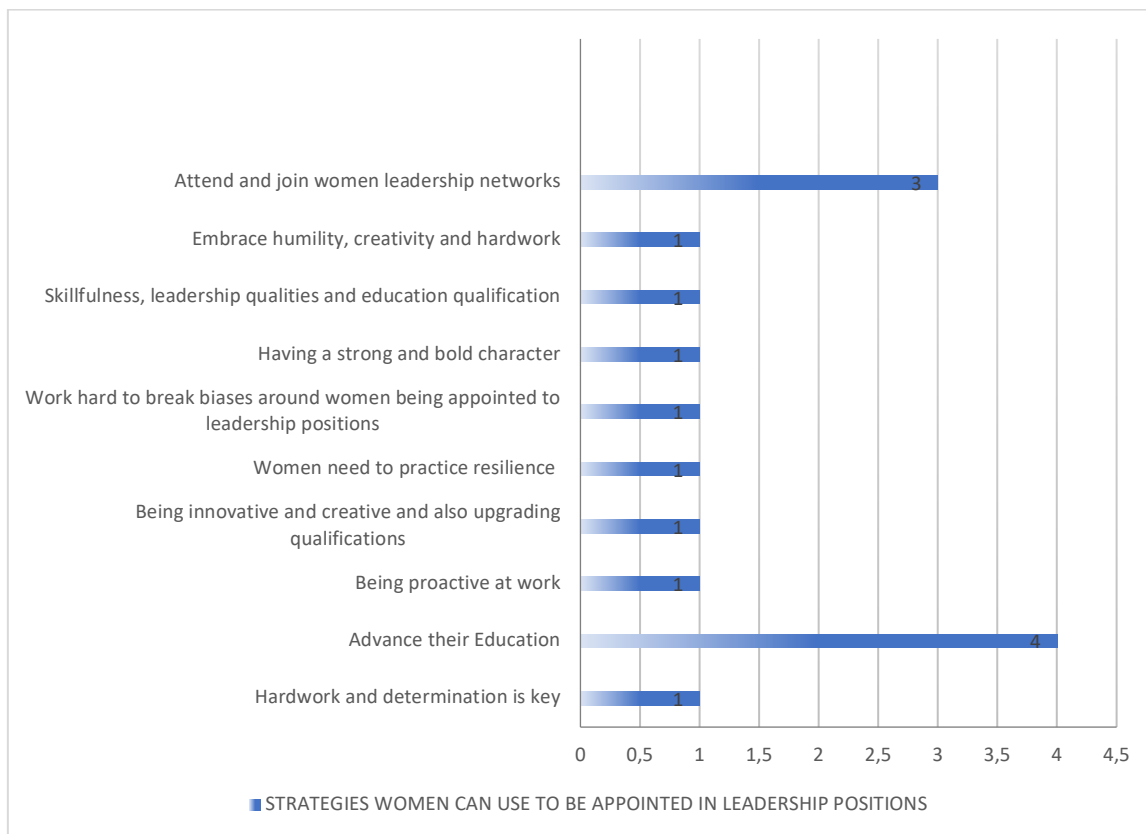


Fig. 1. Strategies women can use to be appointed in leadership positions.

Source: Primary Data, 2023

Another respondent mentioned that government has adopted an integrated approach to stakeholder engagement on women leadership. Other respondents mentioned that government has gone large on the promotion of girl child education and also by offering scholarships to outstanding women to advance their education so that they may have a chance to take up decision making roles and other measures too.

In responding to the strategies that women can use to be appointed into leadership positions, one of the interviewed headteachers mentioned that women need to invest in education. She narrated that,

We as women need to ensure that we invest in education. Leadership is not an easy thing but through good education, one is able to understand issues surrounding management on a deeper perspective. So young female teachers should invest in good education to stand a chance of being appointed to management positions as deputy headteacher or headteacher (Headteacher, 2023).

In addition to the above point, another headteacher during our field interview disclosed that,

As for me, I believe that there is need of embracing hard work, creativity and determination at work. Female teachers need to work extremely hard and execute every task given effortlessly. Female teachers should also be very innovative and creative as they carry out their daily duties as this send a good signal of leadership potential to senior management. Female teachers need to be very determined as they go about their daily work. For me, this position came with many hurdles but what has helped me stand out is my level of creativity, innovativeness, hard work and determination (Headteacher, 2023).

However, the district education standards officer mentioned the need for women to undergo leadership master classes and mentorship so that they are prepared or sharpened for leadership. She narrated that,

There are a lot of challenges that come with being appointed as a female leader in an institution like ours, for instance I am in a very sensitive position that allows me to sit on decision making table with high officials and others. This comes with lots of challenges such as gender stereotypes and others. One thing that has helped me in my leadership journey is being exposed to leadership master classes and mentorship which has exposed me emerging trends in leadership and many other important subjects surrounding female leadership. To that effect, I would say that to be appointed to leadership positions, women need to be exposed to leadership master classes and mentorship (DESO, 2023).

In addition, the provincial education standards officer mentioned that women need to create stronger networks that can be used as a resource base for mentorship and nurturing. She opined that,

I would like women out there to know that your network is your net worth. I feel to be appointed to a leadership position, there is ardent need of creating stronger female networks that would be a resource base for a lot of things such as mentorship for women leaders and other resources that would be of help to upcoming female leaders (PESO, 2023).

In substantiation to the above point, the assistant director at the ministry of Education headquarters stressed the importance of women leaders joining strong networks. She opined that,

Women leadership networks are very important as they in build a sense of self-worth for a woman leader. Through these networks, one is able to build various skills and enhance not only their leadership skills but other pertinent skills too such as financial literacy, investment opportunities, work opportunities and many others (Ass. HR Director, MOE, 2023).

For Chidongo Phiri (2022, p. 191) these highlighted themes are contextualized in social network relations. Of particular concern is that worldwide networks have been claimed to be an increasing important feature of post-modern education and post-modern politics in both the Western and underdeveloped democracies. Therefore, we argue that the informality and semi-autonomy of network relations makes a better strategy for women managers at the Ministry of Education to reduce and eliminate poverty in Zambia.

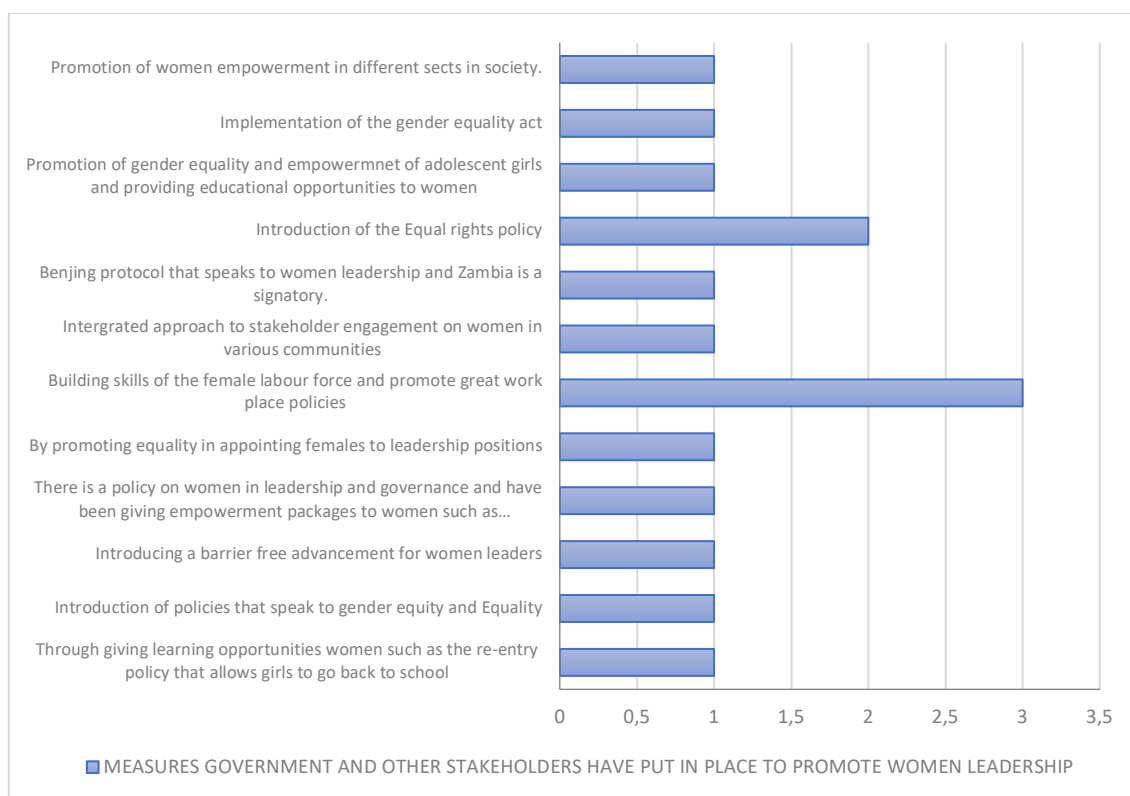


Fig. 2. Measures government and other stakeholders have put in place to promote women leadership.

Source: Primary Data, 2023.

C. Measures to Put in Place to ensure that Women are appointed in Leadership Positions

In understanding the measures that have been put in place by the government and other stakeholders to ensure that women are appointed in leadership positions, several responses were given during the interviews with various female leaders. As a measure, one headteacher during an interview mentioned implementation of an integrated approach to stakeholder engagement on women in various communities. She further explained that,

An integrated approach to stakeholder engagement is important for promoting women's leadership in various communities because it promotes inclusive decision-making, collaborative problem-solving, sustainable outcomes, and increased accountability. For me, this approach ensures that all stakeholders have a voice in the decision-making process, including us women who may have been traditionally excluded from leadership roles. By involving all stakeholders in the decision-making process, an integrated approach will surely help to ensure that diverse perspectives are considered and that decisions reflect the needs and interests of all stakeholders (Headteacher, 2023).

In addition, a senior human resource officer at PEOs office mentioned that the Beijing protocol is also a measure that speaks to women leadership and that Zambia is a signatory to it. She further highlights that,

The Beijing Protocol recognized that education and training are critical for enabling women to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in leadership positions. The document called for measures to ensure that women have equal access to education and training opportunities at all levels. Another provision that stands out for me in the Beijing Protocol is the emphasis on the importance of women's participation in decision-making at all levels, including in political, economic, and social spheres. The document called for measures to increase the number of women in leadership positions, including through affirmative action policies (Senior HR. PEO, 2023).

Furthermore, the Director for Curriculum Development at the Ministry of Education stressed the importance of the gender equality act as a measure put in place by government and other stakeholders to ensure that women are appointed in leadership positions. She opined that,

In terms of women's leadership, the Gender Equality Act can help to level the playing field by ensuring that women have equal access to leadership positions in both the public and private sectors. The act can also help to address the barriers that women face in accessing leadership positions, such as gender stereotypes and cultural biases that may limit women's opportunities to take on leadership roles (Director Curriculum Development, MOE HQ2023).

V. DISCUSSION

A. How Women and Other Stakeholders Can Help Women Navigate into Decision-Making Positions

Our finding shows that there are several ways that women and other stakeholders can address the challenges faced by women in leadership positions. According to our findings, some of these strategies include:

1) Building supportive networks

Women can build supportive networks of mentors and peers who can provide guidance and support in their roles. These networks can also help to connect women with leadership opportunities and resources. In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, women are more likely to experience social, economic, and political marginalization. Women have therefore gone forward to create supportive networks for both professionals and other women too in rural areas to have access to basic needs and resources. Studies have shown that when women have greater access to resources and opportunities, such as education and employment, they are better able to participate in the economy, have a stronger voice in politics, and are less likely to be victims of violence (Howden & Meyer, 2011; Mulenga & Daka, 2022).

2) Advocating for better policies that promote gender parity and equality

This can involve advocating for policies and practices that promote gender equity and diversity in leadership. The Zambian government has implemented policies aimed at promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, such as the National Gender Policy, which seeks to ensure that gender is mainstreamed into all sectors of society. Additionally, the government has put in place laws and policies to combat gender-based violence, such as the Anti-Gender-Based Violence Act and the Victim Support Fund.

3) Developing leadership skills

Women can develop their leadership skills through training, coaching, and professional development opportunities. This can help them to build confidence and competence in their roles, and to take on more challenging leadership positions. According to Loti (2020) Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) have also played an important role in promoting gender equality in Zambia. For example, the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) provides education and training for women and girls, while the Non-Governmental Organizations Coordinating Council (NGOCC) advocates for women's rights and gender equality in Zambia.

4) Engaging in mentorship and education

Women can engage in mentorship and education to help support their career development and advancement. According to Goetz (2001), it looks at women's rights that includes provisions on promoting women's economic and political participation and ensuring women's access to education and healthcare.

Promoting work-life balance: Women can advocate for policies and practices that support work-life balance, such as flexible work arrangements and parental leave policies. This can help to address the challenges of balancing work and family responsibilities. A study by Northouse (2015) examines the relationship between the availability of work flexibility and work-family conflict, finding that having access to flexible work arrangements can reduce work-family conflict and improve work-life balance for women. As such, promoting work-life balance for women requires a combination of individual and organizational strategies, such as flexible work arrangements, social support, and cultural shifts towards valuing work-life balance.

5) Addressing bias and discrimination

Women and other stakeholders can work to address bias and discrimination in their organizations and communities. This can involve implementing anti-discrimination policies and training programs and promoting diversity and inclusion initiatives.

However, the researchers feel that addressing the challenges faced by women in leadership positions requires a multi-faceted approach that involves building supportive networks, advocating for change, developing leadership skills, promoting work-life balance, addressing bias and discrimination, and engaging in mentorship and sponsorship relationships.

By working together, women and other stakeholders can help to promote greater gender equity and diversity in leadership positions in the education sector. A paper by Tamale (2013) provides a review of the literature on gender quotas and female leadership, finding that quotas can be effective in increasing the representation of women in leadership positions and reducing bias and discrimination in the workplace. In addition, Gouws (2008) examined gender biases among science faculty in the evaluation of job candidates.

The authors found that faculty members rated male candidates more favorably than equally qualified female candidates and that these biases had a negative impact on the careers of female scientists. As such, addressing bias and discrimination in the workplace requires a combination of policy interventions, such as affirmative action and diversity policies, and cultural shifts towards valuing diversity and inclusion.

B. Strategies that Women Use to Navigate into Being Appointed in Leadership Positions

As shown in our findings, there are several strategies that women can use to navigate into being appointed in leadership positions. Navigating into being appointed in leadership positions requires a combination of building a strong professional network, seeking out leadership opportunities, pursuing professional development, developing a personal brand, cultivating strategic relationships, advocating for oneself, and overcoming self-doubt. By taking a proactive and strategic approach to their career development, women can increase their chances of being appointed in leadership positions in the education sector. A study conducted by Villiers (2010) examined the experiences of women headteachers in Israel, focusing on their work-life balance and career progression. The author found that women who were successful in navigating into leadership positions were those who had support from their families and colleagues, as well as the ability to manage their time effectively. An article by Wood and Newton (2006) presented a theoretical framework for understanding the mentor-mentee relationship and its role in career development.

The author argues that having a mentor can be a key strategy for women seeking to navigate into leadership positions. Further, according to a report by Zimmerer and Yasin (1998). On the Future of work, the report examined the changing nature of work and its impact on women's careers and family lives. The author suggests that strategies for women seeking to navigate into leadership positions include building networks and support systems, negotiating for flexibility and support at work, and developing skills and expertise in areas of strategic importance to their organizations. Furthermore, Mazur and Pollock (2009) examined the persistence of gender stereotypes in the workplace and their impact on women's career advancement. The authors suggest that women can overcome these stereotypes by developing a leadership style that emphasizes collaboration, empathy, and inclusivity, rather than traditional masculine traits (Phiri *et al.*, 2020) like assertiveness and competitiveness. All in all, women can use a range of strategies to navigate into leadership positions in the education sector, including building networks, finding mentors, negotiating for flexibility, developing strategic skills and expertise, and challenging gender stereotypes about leadership.

C. Measures put in Place to Ensure That Women are appointed in Leadership Positions

Furthermore, the government of Zambia and other stakeholders have implemented various measures to promote gender equity and diversity in leadership positions. Some of these measures include:

Policy frameworks: The government has put in place policy frameworks such as the National Gender Policy (NGP) and the National Policy on Gender in Education (NPGE) to promote gender equality and equity in education. These policies provide a framework for promoting women's participation and leadership in the education sector. The government has adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015.

1) Gender mainstreaming

The government has also adopted a gender mainstreaming approach to ensure that gender is integrated into all policies, plans, and programs in the education sector. This approach aims to address the systemic barriers that prevent women from participating in leadership positions.

2) Affirmative action

The government has implemented affirmative action measures to increase the representation of women in leadership positions. For example, the Ministry of Education has set a target of at least 50% representation of women in all leadership positions.

3) Networking and collaboration

Women in leadership positions have also formed networks and collaborations to support each other and advocate for gender equality in the education sector. For example, according to Jones and Palmer (2011) the Women in Education Leadership Network (WELN) has been established to provide a platform for women to share experiences and support each other in their leadership roles.

4) Advocacy and awareness-raising

The government and other stakeholders have also engaged in advocacy and awareness-raising activities to promote women's leadership in education. These activities aim to change attitudes and behaviors that perpetuate gender inequality in the education sector.

Therefore, the government of Zambia and other stakeholders have taken a multi-faceted approach to promoting women's leadership in the education sector.

By implementing policy frameworks, gender mainstreaming, affirmative action, capacity building, advocacy, awareness-raising, networking, and collaboration, they are working to address the systemic barriers that prevent women from being appointed to leadership positions.

VI. CONCLUSION

The article has also shown that women are resilient and resourceful when it comes to navigating obstacles in decision-making positions. They often use strategies such as building networks, seeking out mentors and sponsors, and developing their own expertise to overcome the challenges they face. In addition, organizations can take steps to support women in decision-making positions. This can include providing access to mentorship and sponsorship programs, offering training and development opportunities, and creating a culture that values diversity and inclusion. While women do face challenges in decision-making positions, they are capable of overcoming these obstacles and succeeding in these roles. By taking steps to support women in these positions, organizations can help to promote greater gender equality and diversity in leadership. The following recommendations can help women navigate challenges in decision-making positions:

1. Address gender stereotypes: Organizations should strive to challenge and change gender stereotypes that limit women's leadership opportunities. This can be done by promoting positive role models and implementing programs that challenge unconscious bias and stereotypes.
2. Provide mentorship and sponsorship: Organizations should provide women with access to mentorship and sponsorship programs that help them develop leadership skills and provide them with career guidance. This can include pairing women with senior leaders who can offer support and guidance.
3. Offer training and development: Organizations should offer training and development opportunities that help women build the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in decision-making roles. This can include leadership training, communication skills training, and technical training in areas related to their work.
4. Encourage networking: Women should be encouraged to network and build relationships with colleagues and leaders in their field. This can help them gain visibility, build alliances, and develop a support system that can help them overcome challenges.

Lastly, these recommendations can help women navigate challenges in decision-making positions by addressing gender stereotypes, providing mentorship and sponsorship, offering training and development, promoting diversity and inclusion, encouraging networking, and advocating for change. By implementing these strategies, organizations can support women in leadership roles and promote greater gender equality and diversity in decision-making positions.

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