What drives Women Leaders to Adopt an Authoritarian Model of Power? An Essay on Female Principals in Kenya

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Abstract

There is ample evidence that a number of women leaders tend to adopt an authoritarian model of leadership. If I have found it necessary to question what drives women principals to adopt authoritarianism, it is not to denounce them, but to try to understand the issues that confront them as they endeavour to lead their schools, and some of these issues not doubt produced by the patriarchal hegemony in Kenya. Following this logic, I will show that female principals are products of and players in a patriarchal social world that reminds us that survival is at stake for women in the leadership game.

Introduction

To put into context the question of what drives women principals to adopt an authoritarian model of power, I will set off from a recent study, which I carried out on the leadership behaviour of women principals in Kenya (Kariuki, 1998). The greater part of my research was based on the Leadership Behaviour Description Questionnaire (LBDQ). After a battery of analyses, I was led to believe that the women principals in the study exhibited authoritarianism in view of their high-structure-low-consideration leadership style. Moreover, the teachers in the study drew attention to the domineering and impartial practices of the female principals in the open-ended items of the questionnaire. One feature that emerged in the study was that women principals received higher ratings on their leadership performance from the male teachers than from the female teachers. How could I not feel worried that my research had portrayed women so negatively? Thus you can see how I have come to question the deriving force behind authoritarianism among women principals. In the search for answers, a focus on how patriarchy is necessary. Here I focus on how patriarchy constructs and impacts on the female leadership style.

Patriarchal politics and female leadership

It seems to me that powerful androcentric standards in Kenya can provide a rationale for female principals attraction to authoritarianism. Why do I bring up the patriarchal model in Kenya? It is because leadership in Kenya has long been a male terrain. Between 1969 and 1992, women in Kenya never formed more than 3% of elected members of parliament, while in the civil service they formed on average 4.5% of all personnel in the top echelons (Maina & Mbugua, 1996). But how does authoritarianism feature in these prevailing conditions? The idea of political leadership in Kenya has tended to reflect the male, authoritarian and aggressive model of power. The benevolent dictatorship of President Kenyatta (Kenya's first president) and the 'big man' dictatorship ascribed to his successor, President Moi, are well

illustrated by various writers (Lacey, 2002; Throup & Hornsby, 1998). Thompson (2003) notes that patriarchal relations of power may allow a small percentage of women to enjoy positions of power or privilege, but they do so on men's terms and as exceptions to the rule. It can therefore be argued that women upon ascending into leadership positions tend to replicate the male authoritarian leadership.

A number of writers confirm that indeed women in leadership positions are not only authoritarian but also competitive, individualistic and non-supportive, if not antagonistic to other women. They lament that women adopting this type of leadership risk being seen as unfeminine and earn labels such as 'social males', 'queen bees', and 'isolates'. They argue that women presidents such as Philippine's retired Prime Minister Corazon Aquino, Pakistan's Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, and Britain's Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher resorted to masculine leadership strategies that were marked by authoritarianism and lack of support for women (Blumen, 1992; Wiener, 1995; Peterson & Runyan, 1999).

Eagly and Schmidt (2001) suggest that agentic characteristics, which are ascribed more strongly to men than women, describe an assertive, controlling and confident tendency. On the other hand, communal characteristics that are ascribed more to women than to men, describes primarily a concern for the welfare of other people. The aptness of the caring style of leadership being attributed to women in leadership positions should not be lost. Indeed, a number of scholars have documented that female principals have a caring, relationship-oriented or collaborative style; a style that have been viewed as instrumental to the morale of staff and students (Gilligan, 1977; Kochan, Spencer & Mathews, 2000; Hines, 1999; Ouston, 1993). The critical point here concerns the practice of authoritarian leadership among women leaders, which is in contrast to the caring leadership ascribed to female leadership. The next section outlines the conditions that possibly lead women leaders to adopt the male-authoritarian model of leadership.

Patriarchal construction of women's leadership

In order to understand why female principals adopt authoritarianism, first means understanding the conditions in which they work through to attain leadership. A major phenomenon that must not be overlooked is their personal struggles while growing up. Sufficient evidence exists that gender based discrimination in Kenya is frequently reflected in socio-cultural attitudes that tend to favour boys and place girls at a disadvantage (Republic of Kenya, 1999). The comment of a young female student in Kenya provides a glimpse of the social acceptance of gender discrimination:

> Why do we argue with tradition that will never change? We are women and we must do, as we are told, otherwise who will marry you, if they know that you are so aggressive? (Student quoted in Mungai, 2002:67)

Hence, girl child discrimination marks the point at which early gender subjugation begins for future women principals and yet is the stage in which they form deep-rooted norms and values.

As if this is not enough, gender oppression rears its ugly head in the workplace. It can be seen in the promotion system where it takes longer for female teachers to become

heads of departments than their male counterparts. Further, female teachers experience disrespect from male students in communities where females have low social status compared to males (Eshiwani, 1995; Republic of Kenya, 2001). Yet this is the stage that prepares female teachers (as candidates for headship) for prospective leadership positions.

As women finally ascend into leadership, patriarchal norms are still to be found. This is evident in the fact that the Teachers Service Commission of Kenya deploys women to head schools that will not evoke discontent by school communities that prefer male head-teachers. In addition, the remarkably low number of women principals when compared to male principals in the highest grades given on promotion points to the gender biases that disadvantage women (Barngetuny, 1999; Teachers Service Commission, 1997).

To elaborate on the connection between female principals and the authoritarian model in the workplace, one could like Thompson (2003) suggests that when the situation of women demands exceptional survival skills and lends itself to oppositional skills, it may promote a type of authoritarian agency incompatible with the ideals of femininity. This section highlights the challenges that women principals face as they endeavour to achieve their organisational goals.

Schools headed by women in Kenya should be seen as highly gendered spaces. This is evident, for example, in FAWEs's (1995) account of Headmistress Priscilla Nangurai from Maasai-land in Kenya, which begins with how Maasai men do not always appreciate her radical defiance in the face of traditional beliefs and cultural norms relating to Maasai women and girls. At times her mission has been to retrieve young girls, often as young as 10 years old, who have gone home to be circumcised but haven't come back invariably because the parents have been paid bride prince and are about to marry off their daughters. Female circumcision in Maasai culture not only prevents girls from reporting back to school, but also leads to performance among girls. Knowing that they are *esiankiki* (real women), girls no longer put effort in academic work as their new status has made them ready for marriage. In view of this context, Nangurai is an aggressive 'gatekeeper' in the sense that she protects pupils from getting 'hijacked' into unwanted marital contracts. This illustrates that the women led schools are contested spaces involving struggles with patriarchy.

The significance of patriarchy lies in its pervasive impact on education, with far-reaching implications on women principal's leadership styles. Various reports have indicated that there is political influence in the appointments of members of schools boards and politicisation of education decisions (Republic of Kenya, 1999; 2001). In essence women principals have to work within this patriarchal infrastructure, in addition to implementing patriarchal decisions. For instance, when a presidential directive was passed that secondary schools must admit 85 per cent of their students from their district (local areas), it disadvantaged students from districts with weak schools. This arrangement according to Kibera (1994) impacted negatively on girls more than boys in terms of educational aspirations and occupational choices. Women principals as custodians of power and authority in their schools were required to implement this decision.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is sufficient to indicate that there is considerable support that the schools within which women operate are predisposed to patriarchal dynamics. The women principals have to take charge of this space as individuals who themselves have been exposed to patriarchal attitudes and discrimination all rooted in socialisation. An initiative that seeks to address female principals authoritarianism needs to take into account the convergence of the contexts found in the schools, and the female principals social and professional trajectory. Producing awareness of this mechanism is the beginning of not only absolving authoritarian female leadership, but also seeking ways to disarm the patriarchal order that sustains it. Finally, I should at least say that I intend to address some of the issues that I have raised in this essay in my on-going doctoral thesis on the social factors that shape the leadership styles of women principals. This essay can thus be seen as an approachable discussion that will be developed further in a more rigorous form.

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