

# Breaking Barriers and Building Bridges: Unveiling the Enablers of Women School Leaders to Overcome Gender Inequality in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examined the enablers of women school leaders in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, which can be leveraged to address persistent challenges of gender inequality. Globally, women in leadership roles face numerous obstacles that hinder their professional growth and negatively impact their well-being. Despite ongoing gender equity initiatives in South Africa, women continue to experience gender discrimination. This study aimed to identify the enablers that women in school leadership could utilise to mitigate the adverse effects of societal expectations on their gender identity. Using a phenomenological Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) design, the research focused on empowering and collaborating with women school leaders. The paper is framed within the critical pedagogy theory (CPT), which advocates for the examination of power structures and patterns of inequality, urging women to awaken their critical consciousness in the pursuit of emancipation from oppression. Data was gathered through individual face-to-face interviews with Deputy Principals (DPs), one Head of Department (HD), and two school principals, and analysed thematically. The findings revealed three key themes that women in leadership roles use to navigate and counteract gendered expectations: networking, the revision of outdated policies, and mentoring for change. By emphasising these enablers, the study outlines practical strategies that can assist women school leaders in effectively combating gender inequality and successfully leading their schools. Further implications for practice include the need for continuous professional development and capacity-building sessions aimed at empowering women in school leadership. Additionally, the paper advocates for societal empowerment through training sessions and seminars aimed at alleviating gender discrimination.

## KEYWORDS

enabler, CBPR, women school leadership, gender discrimination, critical pedagogy

## INTRODUCTION

Over time, women have faced persistent stereotypes and biases that have hindered their ability to lead effectively. A thorough understanding of the historical context of these challenges is essential for developing strategies to overcome them. Historically, women have been perceived as lacking key leadership qualities such as decisiveness, assertiveness, and strategic thinking (Adekanmbi et al., 2024; Adeleke et al., 2024; Phipps & Prieto, 2021). These perceptions have been reinforced by societal norms that prioritise women's familial and caregiving responsibilities over their professional advancement (Aderibigbe et al., 2023; Ohalete et al., 2023; Sales et al., 2020). As a result, women aspiring to leadership roles often face criticism for exhibiting traits considered too assertive, while simultaneously being expected to embody nurturing, maternal characteristics. The feminist movements of the 19th and 20th centuries played a pivotal role in challenging these stereotypes and advancing the struggle for women's workplace rights (Abrahams et al., 2024; Davis & Craven, 2022; Ibeh et al., 2024; Osasona et al., 2024). Notably, the feminist critique of 1963 questioned the traditional gender roles that confined women to domestic responsibilities, encouraging them to seek fulfillment beyond conventional expectations. In contemporary democratic societies, education remains a critical mechanism for promoting gender equality, extending from classrooms to leadership roles. Education serves as a powerful tool for advancing gender equality, playing a pivotal role in shaping leadership pathways. As a result, the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), addressing various global challenges, including the 4th (Quality Education) and 5th (Gender Equality). This calls for curriculum reforms to eliminate gender stereotypes and ensure diverse representation. By incorporating inclusive materials that highlight contributions from both genders and integrating gender studies modules, education systems can raise awareness about gender issues and equality (de Villarreal & Scotton, 2024). Moreover, teacher training is another crucial aspect. Gender sensitivity training equips educators to recognize and address biases, fostering an equitable learning environment (Kroese, 2022). As role models, teachers can demonstrate gender-equitable behavior, encouraging all students equally in various subjects and activities. Student awareness programs are also vital. Social awareness initiatives and self-awareness activities promote respect, mutual understanding, and self-confidence among students, helping them realize their potential regardless of gender (Steffens et al., 2021). By integrating these strategies, education systems can significantly contribute to gender equality and empower individuals to pursue diverse roles and careers.

Achieving gender equality requires women leaders to employ diverse strategies to overcome entrenched stereotypes and biases (Burns & Bowling, 2021; Lawal, 2024; Northey, 2022). Numerous case studies highlight the effectiveness of various approaches adopted by women leaders in navigating these challenges and enhancing their leadership efficacy. For instance, Dr. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka stands out for her unwavering commitment to advocating for women's rights and marginalized communities. As South Africa's first female

Deputy President and former Executive Director of UN Women, she spearheaded groundbreaking initiatives and policies promoting global gender equality. Her contributions extended beyond gender advocacy, emphasizing inclusive leadership and mentoring other women to develop leadership capabilities (Al Naqbi, 2023; Benkirane & Benazzi, 2023; Hashimy, 2023). Similarly, Dr. Thuli Madonsela is renowned for her steadfast dedication to justice and her impartial defense of South Africa's Constitution. Exemplifying servant leadership, she prioritizes the needs of others, using her composed demeanor to navigate complex challenges effectively. Her compassionate leadership fosters empathy and connection with those she leads, while her clear communication and commanding presence inspire confidence among women in leadership (Balona & Digo, 2024; Ford-Turner, 2021). Indra Nooyi, former CEO of PepsiCo, is celebrated for her authenticity and confident leadership style (Chhabria-Addepalli, 2023; Maldonado, Vera & Spangler, 2022). Nooyi balanced self-assurance with approachability, employing a collaborative leadership approach. Her authenticity, shaped by her cultural background and personal values, resonated with employees and stakeholders alike, contributing significantly to PepsiCo's growth and innovation. Nooyi's ability to confront and overcome biases has inspired other women leaders to lead with integrity and resilience. Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors, has similarly emphasized the importance of creating supportive networks to overcome gender-based stereotypes and prejudices. By building strong relationships with mentors and sponsors, Barra navigated the automotive industry's challenges, eventually becoming the first female CEO of a major automobile manufacturer. Her journey has inspired women to seek mentors and allies to advance their careers (Al Naqbi, 2023; Farhan, 2022; Ingersoll et al., 2023).

These case studies demonstrate that women leaders can effectively combat gender inequality by employing strategies such as collaborative leadership, resilience, policy implementation, assertiveness, authenticity, building supportive networks, emotional intelligence, communication skills, and leveraging diversity as a strength. By drawing on the experiences of these leaders, women can enhance their leadership effectiveness and overcome workplace stereotypes and biases.

### **Problem statement**

Despite considerable progress toward gender equality, women in leadership roles, both globally and in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, continue to face entrenched gender discrimination that hampers their professional growth and undermines their well-being. Traditional gender roles and societal expectations create significant obstacles for women, particularly those in school leadership positions. While all school leaders are required to adhere to policies in managing schools, these challenges are further exacerbated by outdated policies and inadequate support systems, which perpetuate gender inequality and hinder the advancement of women in leadership. The ongoing neglect of gender equality initiatives compounds these issues, forcing women school leaders to navigate a hostile environment with insufficient institutional backing.

Women principals are expected to fulfill their responsibilities effectively while facing these adversities.

This study seeks to identify and explore enablers that women school leaders in KwaZulu-Natal can employ to mitigate the negative impact of societal expectations on their well-being and gender identity.

### **Research question**

This paper responded to the following question:

What practical enablers can women school leaders employ to mitigate the negative impact of entrenched gender discrimination?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Impact of societal expectations on women in educational Leadership**

Women in leadership roles across various sectors, including education, face substantial challenges, largely stemming from societal expectations and gender biases (The State of Women-Owned Businesses, 2018). These societal pressures often give rise to stereotypes that unjustly undermine their abilities. Women leaders are frequently judged more harshly than their male counterparts, particularly when attempting to balance assertiveness with nurturing behaviors. This creates an environment of inequitable evaluations and limited opportunities for career advancement. Consequently, it becomes imperative to equip women leaders with the necessary tools and support to navigate these biases and stereotypes (Smith & Sinkford, 2022). Additionally, women are often expected to excel in multiple roles simultaneously, such as leadership responsibilities in the workplace and family obligations at home. This dual expectation frequently leads to psychological burnout and career disruptions, especially in organisations that lack supportive cultures. Gender identity challenges, coupled with the absence of meaningful organisational support, can further hinder women's ability to implement policies effectively and lead with confidence. Some organisations may fail to fully recognize the impact of these stereotypes and biases, inadvertently undermining strategies that could enable women to succeed in leadership roles (Boamah, 2022). To address these challenges, it is critical for organisations, leaders, and society at large to make concerted efforts to foster inclusive and supportive environments where women can thrive. The prevailing culture of bias has significantly contributed to the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions. This is partly due to the pervasive belief that women are less qualified than men for such roles (Heilman et al., 2024). The lack of representation also limits opportunities for women to find mentors and role models, further delaying their career progression.

Although access to professional networks and mentoring is crucial for career development, women often have limited access to these resources compared to men, which hinders their growth and success. The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions makes it difficult for them to find role models and mentors to support their professional advancement. In South Africa, the historical underrepresentation of women leaders has

affected their current leadership skills and conflict-resolution abilities (Bush, 2021). This imbalance in institutional culture has persisted due to a lack of concrete measures to address gender inequalities and stereotypes. As a result, women, particularly those from minority backgrounds, experience gender discrimination in the form of tokenism, racism, sexism, and ageism. Managing these intersecting identities while navigating leadership roles is mentally and emotionally draining (Erskine et al., 2020). Such experiences of discrimination, coupled with real or perceived threats, can lead to symptoms resembling post-traumatic stress disorder (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019). Black women, in particular, must navigate both racial and gender identities in leadership, facing unique challenges at the intersection of these factors. Chance's (2022) study on resilient leadership in Black women in higher education revealed that, while societal expectations negatively impact them, adversity often fuels their growth, helping them develop essential leadership skills. Their resilience, driven by motivation and a strong sense of leadership calling, enables them to thrive despite the challenges they face. Societal expectations significantly hinder women's career advancement in educational leadership by perpetuating stereotypes, limiting access to professional networks, and fostering unsupportive organizational cultures. Women also face the challenge of balancing leadership roles with family responsibilities, often leading to psychological burnout (Eaves-Boykin, 2020). However, the resilience and strength of women, especially those navigating multiple identities, serve as powerful tools to overcome these barriers. Recognizing and addressing these societal expectations through ongoing professional development is essential for creating an inclusive and supportive environment where women leaders can thrive.

### **Mentorship and Networking programs as enablers for women school leaders**

Mentoring is widely used by organisations to integrate new employees, enhance their skills, and improve self-awareness. While mentorship programs often focus on career development, many organisations also use them to cultivate future leaders (Rohmah et al., 2020). Mentoring operates through two main functions instrumental support and psychosocial support regardless of gender (Eby & Robertson, 2020; Kram, 1985). Instrumental support involves mentors helping mentees achieve their career goals by offering feedback, and guidance, and providing exposure to growth opportunities (Mathieu et al., 2019). Psychosocial support, on the other hand, focuses on developing the mentee's emotional and social competencies through active listening, empathy, and encouragement (Johnson et al., 2007). Mentoring relationships benefits both mentors and mentees, enhancing professional development and emotional well-being (Eby et al., 2013). Female leaders, known for their ability to network, build relationships, and encourage collaboration, find these skills particularly valuable in overcoming gender discrimination in leadership. Patriarchal structures often present challenges for women in leadership, making mentorship and networking crucial for their career progression and mental health (Cruz-González et al., 2020). These processes provide women leaders with the guidance, resources, and opportunities necessary for success, especially in the face of gender-based challenges (Chance, 2022; Orijii et al., 2023).

Mentorship and networking are not isolated activities but continuous efforts that promote positive change by challenging stereotypes and advocating for diversity and inclusion in the workplace. These support systems help women combat gender biases by connecting them with peers and mentors who believe in their abilities, boosting their confidence, and helping them overcome discrimination. They also facilitate access to valuable resources such as training, information, and job opportunities (Goswami et al., 2023; Madsen et al., 2020; Webber & Giuffre, 2019). For women leaders, mentorship provides crucial guidance from experienced professionals, enabling them to navigate complex leadership challenges and reach their full potential. Networking, on the other hand, helps them connect with industry professionals, gain new opportunities, and enhance their visibility and influence (Zachary, 2011). It also aids in developing essential leadership skills such as communication and negotiation. In sectors like education, women leaders can mentor young girls and aspiring female professionals, promoting growth through exposure to best practices. Women can further challenge stereotypes by raising awareness, educating others, and leading by example, thus promoting diversity and inclusion (Smith & Sinkford, 2022; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). By participating in organizational diversity initiatives and supporting the recruitment and advancement of underrepresented groups, they help create a more diverse leadership pipeline. Mentorship and support networks remain critical strategies for women to overcome leadership challenges, advocate for change, and dismantle outdated policies that hinder progress.

### **Revising Policies to Support Gender Equality in Educational Leadership**

Revising policies to support gender equality in educational leadership is essential for ensuring diverse perspectives are represented and fostering fairness across institutions. Modernised policies can directly address and mitigate gender-based discrimination and biases, creating a more equitable environment for all. Inclusive policies are key to developing gender-responsive frameworks that address the broader social challenges faced by marginalized groups worldwide (Rabinowitz & Rabinowitz, 2021; Meagher et al., 2020). For example, in South Africa, the Employment Equity Act (EAA) and affirmative action (AA) have been implemented to increase managerial visibility and ensure equal employment opportunities for all genders. Studies by Lihamba et al., (2006) and Morley (2024) highlight that universities promoting affirmative action have advanced female academics into leadership roles. However, affirmative action is sometimes criticised for perpetuating the myth of female inferiority, and thus it is necessary to establish clear measures to implement it effectively (Morley, 2024). Legislation such as the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, which mandates a minimum of four months of maternity leave, offers support to women. Yet, school managers returning from maternity leave often face challenges, particularly when new policies are introduced during their absence, causing them to feel disconnected or frustrated (Duan et al., 2023). To foster gender equality, several areas need focus, promotion and advancement criteria should be broadened to recognize diverse experiences; pay equity should be ensured through regular audits and transparent salary structures; and work-life balance and parental leave policies must be inclusive, providing

gender-neutral leave and flexible working arrangements. Additionally, anti-harassment and discrimination policies should be reinforced through training and clear reporting mechanisms to create a safe, supportive work environment. Updating, these policies will significantly enhance women's representation in leadership roles by breaking down the barriers that hinder their progress. This change will not only improve organizational performance and employee morale but also lead to more inclusive educational practices, ultimately benefiting all students. By ensuring policies are in line with current gender equality standards, institutions can better comply with legal requirements and uphold ethical standards.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This paper is grounded in the social role theory by Eagly and Wood (1991) and employs a phenomenological Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) design (Hopkinson et al., 2005), framed within critical pedagogy theory (CPT). The study focuses on collaborating with and empowering women leaders in KwaZulu-Natal, specifically identifying enablers that help them overcome gender inequality challenges. CBPR is a collaborative approach that actively engages participants in the research process, fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment among women leaders. By involving community members in decision-making, CBPR enhances community engagement, strengthens trust, and fosters deeper connections within the community. This approach aims to create social and political interventions that benefit teachers, school governing bodies, teacher unions, learners, and the wider community.

When combined with CPT, this method encourages women leaders to critically analyse power structures and patterns of inequality, fostering critical consciousness and emancipation from oppression. In the context of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), examining power dynamics was essential to identifying practical enablers that women leaders can utilize effectively in their roles. The research highlighted key strategies for combating gender inequality and supporting women in leadership, including networking, policy revision, and mentoring. The integration of CBPR and CPT not only addresses immediate challenges but also contributes to long-term, sustainable change by building resilient communities and empowering future generations of women leaders. This holistic approach ensures that the specific needs and priorities of women leaders are met, resulting in more effective and sustainable outcomes.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This paper employed CBPR as a phenomenological approach research design. Leading schools is a practical and lived experience of the four women school principals in this study. In their roles as school leaders, they are challenged by outdated policies, lack of support systems, and unmet promises of gender equality. Amid these adversities, they require practical strategies that will assist them in successfully performing their leadership duties. Data were generated through individual face-to-face interviews with the four women school managers who were the participants of the community-based research project. The interviews were made up of open-

ended questions which allowed the participants to respond freely to the questions posed to them. Permission to interview them was obtained from the KZN Department of Education and the ethical clearance was from the institution. The four school women managers were purposively selected based on their gender and the purpose of this paper. They were the relevant participants to respond to the interview questions. Data triangulation was employed, as defined by Denzin (2012), by gathering data from diverse individuals at various times and in different settings. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, member-checking was conducted, seeking feedback from participants on the data collected. Data were analysed using thematic analysis.

**Table 1.**

*Demographic analysis of the research participants and research sites*

Participant And circuit	Highest qualification	Years experience school management Team	of Age in	Marital Status
P1 Gudlumkhumbane circuit	B. Ed	25	59	M
P2 Guduza circuit	PhD	20	51	M
DP Bacikile circuit	M.Ed	10	38	M
DH Sxavathi circuit	PTD	20	42	M

**Keys:** PhD- Doctor of Philosophy, M.Ed. –Master of Education, B.Ed. Hons – Bachelor of Education Honours, PTD- Primary Teachers Diploma M-married

A brief demographic outlook of the participants and the research sites is provided in Table1. The three schools are primary schools which are located in one rural education district and have been purposively selected since they are all headed by women principals. It is worth noting that the following pseudonyms are used in this paper to identify participants.

Principal 1 - P 1

Principal 2 - P2

Deputy Principal -DP

Departmental Head- DH



## FINDINGS

Through verbatim from participants, the following sections detail the data findings organized by the themes that emerged. The themes include the resilience leadership approach, continuous professional development, and policies as enablers for change. These themes are presented and discussed in the subsequent sections.

### **Theme 1: Resilience leadership approach**

Despite facing significant obstacles, such as resistance from colleagues, and even personal attacks, and unfair treatment the school women leaders demonstrated remarkable resilience in their roles.

*DH, I had lot of challenges but insisted I am not leaving the school, and the systems are in place.*

*P 1 I was told that I would carry the soil with my chest before I get promoted to a principalship. I took over the position knowing very well I would be killed.*

*P 2 I took over from a male colleague, who was acting, and he was very defiant. I had to be strong and make sure that I knew my story otherwise life was going to be difficult for me.*

These accounts align closely with the principles of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), which emphasizes collaboration, empowerment, and addressing systemic inequities through community engagement. The women's experiences underscore the critical importance of resilience and determination, essential qualities in overcoming the systemic barriers that women in leadership positions often face. Their unwavering commitment reflects the core CBPR principle of enacting positive change from within the community, demonstrating that their personal resilience not only enables them to navigate immediate obstacles but also contributes to long-term systemic transformation. The severe resistance faced by these women highlights the deep-seated challenges that women in leadership must confront, including gender-based discrimination and hostility. These experiences highlight the necessity for robust support systems and resilience-building strategies, which are central to the CBPR framework. CBPR's focus on empowering individuals and communities to address and overcome systemic barriers resonates with the struggles faced by these leaders, and its principles can offer a practical approach to support women in leadership roles. Furthermore, the importance of supporting women leaders is echoed in studies by Boamah (2022) which advocate for increased resources and systemic support for women in leadership. The determination of these women to persevere, despite significant challenges, is consistent with CBPR's goal of fostering community resilience and leadership from within. This approach not only addresses immediate challenges but also lays the foundation for long-term systemic change, as noted in Chance (2022). Consequently, this analysis highlights the value of CBPR as a unique and effective strategy for supporting women leaders, providing them with the tools and resilience needed to overcome systemic barriers and promote broader community change.

### **Theme 2: Mentorship and networking**

The participants were asked to identify strategies and interventions to empower women managers, and the data revealed that mentorship and networking are critical.

***P1** As a principal I capacitate staff members and learners whenever I get time. But I also need to be continuously developed to capacitate them, not occasionally as happens now.*

***DH** There is no proper mentorship structure, the employer does not have the capacity due to several schools in our district. If you are fortunate, the NGO will select you for a development program.*

***DP** Network and mentorship, can help, take us for intensive training courses when we get trained and get certificates. Constantly getting empowered will help us also build our capacity to manage the schools effectively.*

***P 2**, in my circuit, we do have a formal professional development structure. We meet regularly and have a WhatsApp group where we share opportunities, motivate each other, and mentor newly appointed principals.*

The data highlights the need for continuous, rather than periodic, professional development for women school managers. This aligns with the principles of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), which emphasizes ongoing community engagement and capacity building. The participants' views reflect the CBPR and critical pedagogy frameworks, both of which advocate for collaborative and continuous learning. The lack of formal mentorship and networking structures within educational districts, as noted by the participants, underscores the reliance on external support from NGOs, which further aligns with critical pedagogy's focus on collaborative learning and the co-creation of knowledge. The participants also stressed the role of networking and mentorship as key enablers in empowering women school managers to combat gender discrimination. This is consistent with the findings of Cruz-González et al., (2020), who highlighted women's ability to build relationships and work collectively towards a common vision. For instance, P2's structured professional development activities within her circuit, including regular meetings and the use of WhatsApp groups to share opportunities and mentor others, demonstrate the community-driven approach advocated by CBPR and critical pedagogy. The data emphasizes the importance of continuous professional development through sustained mentorship and networking. These strategies are essential for empowering women managers to navigate the challenges of gender discrimination, building their capacity to lead effectively, and fostering positive change within their communities.

### **Theme 3: Policies on gender equity**

Participants were asked to share their views on gender equity policies, and they expressed frustration with certain policies, specifically regarding maternity leave and affirmative action, as well as the limited knowledge of some senior department officials.

***P** Some policies frustrate me I went on maternity leave, and no one bothered to update me on what happened in the four months I was away.*

***P 1** Apparently, I was employed as a principal based on affirmative action. This makes teachers not respect me and view me as a token. No matter how hard I perform, this demoralises me to the point that I am frustrated and doubting myself.*

**DP** *The gender equity policies have good intentions on paper however they are inadequate initiatives as society is not empowered by them*

In the data, women school leaders voiced frustration with the lack communication during her four-month maternity leave, noting that no updates were provided on school matters during her absence. This reveals a significant gap in the implementation of accouchement leave policies, as there is no proper system for reintegrating school managers after their leave. Another participant expressed the negative impact of being appointed through affirmative action, explaining that her colleagues viewed her as a "token" hire, which undermined her authority and led to feelings of demoralization and self-doubt. These experiences reflect the stigma associated with affirmative action, which, when not properly supported or communicated, can reinforce stereotypes about female leaders and diminish their credibility. This aligns with research by Morley (2024) which suggests that affirmative action is often criticized for labeling beneficiaries as tokens and perpetuating myths of female inferiority. Moreover, the participant's accounts highlight that gender equity policies, while well-intentioned, often lack practical initiatives to empower society and support women leaders effectively. The Basic Conditions of Employment Act, which provides a minimum of four months of maternity leave, offers some protection, but there are no support structures in place for school managers returning to work. This concern is echoed in other studies (Duan et al., 2023) which suggest that returning to work after leave without proper updates or reintegration plans leaves women feeling frustrated and outdated.

To address these issues, promotion and advancement criteria should be redefined to acknowledge the diverse experiences and accomplishments of women leaders, ensuring transparency and fairness in career progression. Anti-harassment and discrimination policies also require strengthening, with regular training and clear reporting mechanisms in place (Meagher et al., 2020; Rabinowitz & Rabinowitz, 2021). Keeping gender equity policies up to date with current standards is essential for institutions to comply with legal requirements and uphold ethical principles. The Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach can effectively address gender discrimination by involving all relevant stakeholders, including women school leaders, teachers, and policymakers, in the development and evaluation of gender equity policies. Incorporating the real-world experiences and insights of women leaders into policymaking ensures that these policies are not only more effective but also inclusive and practical. This collaborative approach ensures that women leaders' voices are heard, their concerns addressed, and the resulting policies are empowering, leading to the overall success of gender equity initiatives.

### **DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS**

The study's findings stress the critical importance of resilience, mentorship, networking, and the effective implementation of gender equity policies as enablers for women leaders within schools. These elements align with the core principles of Community-Based Participatory

Research (CBPR) and critical pedagogy, which emphasise community engagement, capacity building, and collaborative learning to address systemic barriers and promote positive change. The need for continuous support, professional development, and inclusive policies to create equitable educational environments that empower women leaders is evident throughout the findings. The experiences and strategies employed by women school leaders enable them to navigate challenges and foster change reflect CBPR's emphasis on collaboration, empowerment, and addressing systemic inequities through community engagement. The resilience demonstrated by these leaders in overcoming obstacles aligns with CBPR's goal of fostering community resilience and leadership from within. Their determination to persist in leadership roles, despite significant challenges, contributes to broader systemic change that benefits not only the leaders themselves but the entire educational community. Contrary to findings from some studies (Adekanmbi et al., 2024; Adeleke et al., 2024; Phipps & Prieto, 2021), where women were perceived as lacking key leadership qualities, this study confirms that women are challenging historically reinforced societal norms that limited them to familial responsibilities. Women are now utilising CBPR as an effective enabler to overcome gender inequality and advance in leadership roles, as it provides a framework for collaborative engagement and sustained leadership development. Participants consistently called for continuous professional development rather than sporadic training, reflecting CBPR's principle of ongoing community engagement and capacity building. Their testimonies also emphasized the importance of sustained networks and mentorship to help women navigate gender discrimination and enhance their leadership capacities.

The findings further highlight the role of gender equity policies as essential enablers of change, though frustrations with their implementation were evident. Issues such as poor communication during maternity leave and perceptions of tokenism resulting from affirmative action policies were common concerns. Without proper support and transparent communication, such policies can lead to stigma and a lack of respect for women in leadership roles. For gender equity policies to be effective, they must be inclusive, transparent, and fully supported by all stakeholders, including women leaders, teachers, and policymakers. The study suggests that adopting a CBPR approach in the development, implementation, and evaluation of gender equity policies would significantly enhance their relevance and inclusivity by incorporating the real-world experiences of women leaders. This collaborative approach ensures that the voices of women leaders are heard, their concerns addressed, and the resulting policies are practical and empowering, thus improving the overall effectiveness of gender equity initiatives.

### **Implications for Practice and Conclusion**

The study's findings have important implications for promoting gender equity and empowering women in leadership within the education sector. The emphasis on resilience, mentorship, and networking highlights the need for schools and educational institutions to prioritise creating supportive environments that foster these elements (Al Naqbi, 2023; Farhan, 2022; Ingersoll, et

al., 2023). This can be achieved through the establishment of mentorship programs, leadership development workshops, and networking opportunities tailored to the needs of women leaders. The importance of well-implemented gender equity policies also emphasises the necessity for clear communication and transparency in both policy design and implementation. Schools and policymakers must ensure that gender equity initiatives are not only enacted but also effectively communicated and supported by all stakeholders, including teachers, school leaders, and the broader educational community. Clear communication, as Ford-Turner (2021) suggest, inspires confidence and contributes to successful leadership, helping mitigate stigma and perceptions of tokenism, thereby fostering a more inclusive environment for women leaders. Adopting a CBPR approach in the development and implementation of gender equity policies can further enhance the relevance and impact of these strategies. By involving women leaders directly in the creation and evaluation of policies, educational institutions can ensure that initiatives are grounded in real-world experiences and address the actual challenges faced by women in leadership roles. This collaborative process builds capacity, promotes empowerment, and fosters community resilience, ultimately contributing to more sustainable and meaningful change. The persistence of women leaders in overcoming challenges and promoting positive change illustrates the necessity for strong support systems and continuous professional development. Their resilience not only highlights their strength but also advances the broader goal of achieving long-term systemic change that benefits the entire educational community. In conclusion, this study advocates for a shift toward more collaborative and inclusive strategies to support women in leadership roles. By ensuring their voices are heard and their contributions recognized, educational institutions can foster more equitable and thriving educational environments for all.

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