

African Gender Studies Quarterly



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69778/3106-7603/2026/2.1/EN>

EDITORIAL NOTE

It is with great joy that we introduce this inaugural edition of African Gender Studies Quarterly (AGenSQ), a journal established to provide a dedicated platform for rigorous, interdisciplinary scholarship on gender and its intersections with African societies and the broader Global South. As a quarterly publication, we are committed to fostering critical dialogue and advancing knowledge that is both theoretically grounded and contextually relevant.

In this first issue, we are pleased to present a collection of articles that exemplify the depth and diversity of gender scholarship. The opening paper, "A Biopsychosocial Perspective on Sexual Disorders and Dysfunctions: Implications for Diagnosis and Intervention," offers a comprehensive examination of sexual health through biological, psychological, and sociocultural lenses, emphasizing the need for culturally informed care in African contexts. The authors make a compelling case for destigmatising sexual health discussions and integrating multidisciplinary approaches to treatment.

The second article, "Love in the Digital Age: Rethinking Courtship and Romance in Contemporary Society," explores how technology, shifting gender roles, and evolving social norms are transforming intimate relationships. By examining phenomena such as digital dating, emotional labour, and self-love, this paper illuminates the complex terrain of modern romance and its implications for psychological well-being.

Following this, "Cultural Influences on the Perception, Regulation, and Communication of Sexual Content" investigates the powerful role of media in shaping sexual attitudes and behaviours. Drawing on psychological theories, the authors critically analyse how different media forms from social media to pornography influence sexual socialisation, particularly among young people, and advocate for enhanced media literacy and psychological interventions.

The fourth contribution, "Marriage, Sexuality, and Cultural Norms in Indigenous Nigerian Films: A Comparative Analysis of Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo Cinema," employs qualitative content analysis to examine how indigenous films reflect and reinforce cultural values surrounding marriage and sexuality. The study reveals persistent gender double standards while noting emergent progressive shifts, demonstrating the pedagogical function of cinema in sustaining or challenging societal norms.

The fifth article, "Gendered Constructed Strategies in Conflict Resolution: Challenges Faced by Female Secondary School Leaders in Chivi, Zimbabwe," illuminates how gender shapes leadership in educational settings. Through rich qualitative data, the authors identify three distinct gendered strategies employed by female school heads: the motherly care approach, the relational strategy, and the inclusive gender-sensitive approach.

The sixth article, "Political Education and Voters' Behaviour in Nigeria," establishes a strong positive relationship between political education and voter behaviour. Notably, with

women constituting 64.5% of respondents, the findings invite critical reflection on gendered patterns of political participation and the need for gender-sensitive civic education approaches.

We believe these articles have been thoroughly reviewed, and the recommendations offered will help to properly formulate effective solutions to identified issues. This inaugural issue has done well by providing a space where both emerging and established scholars alike have engaged to present themes that demand attention and open engagement. We sincerely hope that this collection will not only inform but also invite deeper reflection and continued scholarship on the evolving intersections of gender and its dynamics as they affect Africa and the rest of the third world.

Dr. O. A.T.Olatunji,
Editor, African Gender Studies Quarterly,
Associate Professor / Reader @ Department of Psychology,
Faculty of the Social Sciences,
Federal University, Oye Ekiti, Ekiti State,
Nigeria.
Email: ajoke.olatunji@fuoye.edu.ngvii

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69778/3106-7603/2026/2.1/a5>

GENDERED CONSTRUCTED STRATEGIES IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION: CHALLENGES FACED BY FEMALE SECONDARY SCHOOL LEADERS IN CHIVI, ZIMBABWE

Clemence Dzingirai,

*Department of Humanities, Nyanningwe High School,
Zimbabwe*

dzingiecl@gmail.com

Rosemary Guvhu,

*Department of Educational Policy Studies and Leadership,
Midlands State University, Zimbabwe.*

guvhur@staff.msu.ac.zw

Anna Moyo,

*Department of Educational Policy Studies and Leadership,
Midlands State University, Zimbabwe.*

moyoan@staff.msu.ac.zw

Abstract

This study established that gender constructed strategies to conflict resolution perpetuated gender stereotypes, debilitating the development of robust and flexible conflict resolution skills in female secondary school leaders. Using an interpretivist paradigm undergirded by qualitative research approaches, the study employed an exploratory multiple-case study research design to capture and synthesise responses from 20 teachers purposively selected from 2-day secondary schools led by female school leaders in Chivi District, Masvingo, Zimbabwe. Data were generated through in-depth face-to-face interviews with 10 participants from school management and focus group discussions, which were organised and conducted with five teachers from each secondary school. The significant findings revealed that female secondary school heads employed gendered constructed conflict resolution strategies, which included: the motherly care approach, the relational strategy, and the inclusive gender-sensitive approach. The study established that there were some challenges related to the stated gendered constructed resolution strategies. The study proposed recommendations such as the need for female school heads, teachers, and school development committees to undergo capacity development in conflict management through workshops and short courses to empower them to identify sources of conflict and manage them before they become destructive. Further recommendations included the empowerment of school management in inclusive and transformational leadership skills to assist school management in identifying diverse skills within their teachers and ancillary staff, and ensure all stakeholders' involvement in decision-making to circumvent conflicts.

Keywords: *Gendered constructed strategy, conflict, conflict management, conflict resolution strategy, school leader, qualitative research approach,*

Introduction

Schools, like other public or private organizations, are sometimes confronted with

challenges emanating from conflict. Conflicts in school organizations are not only inevitable but also common (Yidana, 2022) due to variations in goals, personalities, and interests.

School heads play a vital role in conflict resolution within primary and secondary schools, ensuring smooth and peaceful teaching and learning environments. In Zimbabwe, studies have explored the types and causes of conflicts and how school heads resolve them (Machingambi & Dzimiri, 2024; Makombe & Mangwiro, 2024; Muzenda, 2022). The studies show that conflicts often arise due to resource allocation, interpersonal relationships, and procedural matters. One study found that the most common type of conflict that may occur in a school organization is resource conflict (Muzenda, 2022). This involves competition over limited resources, resulting in misunderstandings and disagreements. Resource conflict can be caused by inadequate resources, prejudiced allocation or unfair distribution, differences in goals and priorities among stakeholders, and a lack of communication and transparency. In resolving conflicts arising from the aforementioned sources, some female secondary school principals in Zimbabwe and South Africa have encountered gendered constructed barriers as they navigated their leadership obligations (Bruyn & Mestry, 2020; Dzingirai & Chauraya, 2022). Obdurate gender constructed barriers in handling and resolving conflicts in schools by female leaders persist and place the latter in a dilemma of adapting feminine or masculine strategies of conflict resolution. Like their male counterparts, female leaders in secondary schools are expected to mediate these conflicts effectively, often relying on negotiation, disciplinary committees, and transparent leadership practices. The approaches by which female school leaders address conflicts can manifest as differences in conflict resolution management styles, and limited participation in certain areas. Potentially, the differences in conflict resolution may emanate from gender biases. This study highlights the gendered constructed challenges faced by female school leaders, proposing the need for an applied recommendation to promote their effective engagement in conflict resolution in schools. The first section of this study discusses conflict management styles across gender, as defined by

the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Model. This is done to situate this study within the related literature, thereby highlighting the gendered gap in the challenges faced by female secondary school leaders as they implement conflict resolution approaches. The second section of this study presents the qualitative research methodology used to generate data on the diverse gendered approaches to conflict resolution in schools led by women. In the third section, findings are presented and discussed as they are related to challenges emanating from the utility of gendered constructed conflict resolution strategies, which included: motherly care approach, the relational strategy, and inclusive gender-sensitive approach. Finally, the study concludes with remarks and recommendations.

Conflict management styles across gender

The world over, studies in conflict management styles in educational institutions ascertain that men and women may comprehend and tackle conflicts differently due to socio-cultural and psychological perspectives and dispositions (Bush, Kirezi, Ashford, & Glover, 2022; Cahyati, Hariri, & Karwan, 2021; Motilal & Chakanyuka, 2021; Ndakolonkoshi & Moyo, 2025). For organizational conflict resolution, this study adopted the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Resolution Model as a framework for understanding and resolving conflicts that occur in a school organization. The model serves as a paradigm for analysing the strategies employed by female school leaders to resolve conflicts. The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Model, propounded by Thomas and Kilmann, provides five strategies for conflict resolution: avoiding, competing, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating (Shaikh, 2022). The avoiding style of conflict resolution is characterized by a low concern for oneself, as one is lowly assertive. It is a deliberate withdrawal from disagreements and is motivated by a desire to circumvent nasty or uncomfortable confrontations or avert swelling the conflict. A competing strategy is characterized by high assertiveness and is emphatic on accomplishing

one's goals at the expense of another party. The accommodating conflict resolution strategy takes cognizance of the needs and concerns of others over one's own. This approach, characterized by a disposition to give up or concede, focuses on upholding amity and preserving relationships. Compromising, as a conflict resolution approach, lies in a middle position between assertive and cooperative strategies. It suggests that all parties involved give up some of their demands to reach a mutually acceptable solution and preserve an amicable relationship. While seemingly pragmatic, this strategy can be both beneficial and detrimental depending on the context. The collaborative conflict resolution strategy aims to find solutions that address the concerns of all parties involved in the conflict. This approach requires open communication, active listening, and a willingness to compromise to achieve a mutually beneficial outcome.

In light of the conflict resolution approaches discussed above, some scholars have examined gender roles and conflict management in organizations, establishing that gender roles can significantly influence how individuals approach conflict and their chosen resolution strategies. These socially constructed preferences for conflict resolution indicate that masculinity is associated with a competitive or dominating conflict management style and negatively linked to avoiding strategies. Conversely, femininity is positively correlated with accommodating and collaborating strategies. Through a systematic review, Dildar and Amjad (2017) argue that conflict resolution strategies mainly differ based on gender differences in handling interpersonal conflict in organizations. Typically, men tend to avoid conflicts more than women, and when they do confront conflict, they are more assertive, often using coercion, aggression, and control tactics. Nonetheless, this study emphasizes that these behaviours should not be viewed as innate or deterministic. Instead, they reflect societal expectations and learned behaviours that shape individuals' conflict resolution strategies, rooted in their perceived gender roles. Therefore, it is important to recognize that

individuals may adopt different conflict resolution strategies based on their personal experiences and gender roles. Additionally, it is crucial to understand that these preferred strategies are not fixed and can change over time. The preferred strategies are not static, as they are subject to change.

Methodology

This study employed the qualitative research approach. The phenomenon that was explored demanded generating insights into human experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2019) from the standpoint of those secondary teachers who worked under the leadership of a female school leader. The qualitative research approach employed in this study was in keeping with the interpretive research paradigm, in which the researchers sought to understand the meanings that secondary school teachers attached to their experiences in the context of conflict management and resolution. The research questions this study put forward were: What gendered strategies were used by secondary school female leaders in conflict resolution? How did secondary school female leaders manage the challenges associated with gendered, constructed conflict-resolution strategies?

As the study aimed to answer the research questions, the epistemological perspective guiding this qualitative research was constructivist-inductive. It focused on understanding how teachers create meaning and knowledge through their experiences and interactions within their school environments (Mantula, Mpofu, Mpofu, & Shava, 2024). An exploratory multiple-case study design was used, with two secondary schools in Chivi District serving as research sites. Scholars define an exploratory multiple case study as a research approach that examines several instances (cases) of a phenomenon within an educational setting to gain a deeper understanding of it (Coombs, 2022; Yin, 2018). Guided by this approach, the study aimed to explore teachers' perceptions of how their female school leader managed and resolved conflicts, thereby developing a more

comprehensive understanding of conflict resolution.

For qualitative data generation methods, the study employed face-to-face semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Data were generated through in-depth face-to-face interviews with ten teachers from school management and focus group discussions, which were organised and conducted with five teachers from each secondary school. The participants were purposively selected. In the face-to-face interviews, teachers were probed deeply about their perspectives concerning how the school's female head managed and resolved conflicts. This had the merit that through the one-on-one settings, the participants were assured of confidentiality as the settings fostered trust, encouraging honesty, especially in the sensitive topic of conflict resolution (Tümen-Akyıldız & Ahmed, 2021). In addition, the interviewer using semi-structured questions enjoyed the flexibility inherent in the method in the sense that questions were adapted to suit the interviewee's response, subsequently yielding deep, rich, and more nuanced insights (Mashuri, Rasaka, Alhabsyi, & Syam, 2022) about the utility of gendered conflict-resolution strategies used by female school leaders.

With focus group discussions, two sessions were conducted with five teachers from each school. Focus group discussions were used to understand teachers' perceptions of the conflict-resolution strategies employed by their female school head. The discussions were not treated as standalone but were used in combination with face-to-face interviews, thereby helping triangulate data, generate new ideas, and identify common themes (Sachdeva, Tamrakar, Perwez, & Gupta, 2024). The advantage of using focus group discussions in this study was that the teachers were provided with a non-threatening platform where they felt free to express their views as they discussed with their colleagues. The teachers were allowed to respond to other group members' responses; hence, they were

able to build and develop ideas. This was what Mantula et al. (2024) referred to as the synergistic effect of the group setting, leading to the production of ideas that could not be generated solely from individual face-to-face interviews.

The study employed conventional thematic analysis procedures for data analysis. (Addu, 2019) In which the researchers identified, analysed, and reported patterns and themes in data from face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions. Guided by Addu's (2019) step-by-step process of thematic analysis, three themes emerged: Theme One, the motherly care approach; Theme Two, the relational strategy; and Theme Three, the inclusive gender-sensitive approach. It is essential to note that all the themes portray gendered conflict resolution strategies, which refer to conflict resolution approaches that are explicitly designed with gender dynamics in mind, taking into account that gender roles, identities, and norms influence how conflicts are resolved (Rehman & Jaleel, 2020). This study acknowledges that conflicts in a school organisation may be socially constructed, grounded in gender expectations, and that resolving them requires addressing these gendered aspects.

Findings and Discussion

Theme One: The motherly care approach

Based on participants' narratives, the predominant gendered strategy was the motherly relationship approach. The following statement by participant 1 reflects the attributes of the motherly approach, which are essentially qualities reminiscent of maternal behaviours such as nurturing, support, compassion, and caring:

When conflicts erupted in our department, our Head of Department (HOD) convened a meeting with our school head. As is commonly known, our HOD would say- this case needs mother (referring to our female school head) to help us solve it... Many times, our school

head aims to make members understand each other and that there be peace and harmony among team members (Participant 1).

In a similar view, another Participant 2 remarked:

Our school head took a neutral role when handling conflicts between teachers... For instance, at our school, the implementation of continuous learning activities (CALA) became a source of conflict. I recall an instance in which teachers clashed over the modalities for implementing the latter. Accordingly, our school head played a significant role in ensuring that teachers with misunderstandings could find each other and discuss them to resolve them (Participant 2).

The motherly approach to conflict resolution is characterised by a desire to maintain a peaceful, friendly working environment at the school. The study established that the participants perceived and appreciated women school heads' conflict-resolution strategies, which reflect a mother's caring way, as they were more than just nurturing growth. This was reflected in a comment uttered by participant 4 as follows:

The other time we had a heated conflict over the inadequacy of sports resources such as soccer balls and whistles, which hindered our preparations to participate in the district schools' competitions. We were very emotional, and one of our male teachers resigned from the post of sports director... yet our female school head continued to listen to these teachers calmly and convinced them not to back out of sports activities... (Participant 4).

The above comment demonstrated that female school leaders did not ignore the teachers' concerns, even though they were expressed in an emotionally charged manner. By calmly responding to the teachers, the female school heads gave them an empathetic ear and treated

them like their own children. Therefore, the female school heads' conflict resolution strategy was more than just nurturing growth, but a reflection of a gendered strategy ingrained in their socialisation and acculturation of having that motherly love and care (Aikins, Enameh-Agboloso, & Agbesinyale, 2021; Muzvidziwa, 2018). In school leadership and conflict resolution, it can be argued that female school heads draw on a mothering care notion.

In the advent of a new curriculum exemplified by Heritage-Based Education 5.0 in Zimbabwe, female school heads, like their male counterparts, were inundated with teacher conflicts arising from the curriculum implementation. In this study, participants' narratives revealed that the mother care strategy was used to resolve conflicts arising from curriculum implementation. The following snippet illustrates this;

Teachers in our History department had a misunderstanding of how the Heritage-Based Education Curriculum is to be implemented, particularly in teaching practical skills aligned with Zimbabwe's key economic sectors. We were used to teaching our students for examinations. Our school head had to listen to our fears and challenges in implementing this new curriculum, and she provided reassurance and scheduled staff development meetings to clear the misunderstandings and conflicts (Participant 6)

In a similar vein, Participant 8 described how her female school head resolved a personal conflict in which the teacher had to leave the invigilation of the exam class to prepare for her examinations with a distance education college. She remarked:

During times of high stress due to my situation, when I had to prepare for examinations with the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), I came into conflict with my HOD, who had assigned me to invigilate O-level students. The HOD was

adamant that I leave after the O-level examinations. Our school head intervened, calling us to a table, and we had to compromise and mutually agree on a new timetable in which I would attend after my examination with ZOU (Participant 9).

The above comments typically reflect the view that female leaders are often characterized as being **more human relations-oriented** than task-oriented (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Mujtaba, 2023). The view sounds gender stereotyped, though, as not all female leaders or male leaders fit this generalisation. Suffice it to say, this study established that female secondary school leaders, during exam or academic pressure, adopted a nurturing stance, encouraging self-care and emotional well-being among their staff members and even learners.

The participants enumerated some common challenges associated with the ‘motherly approach’ for conflict resolution in schools. Participant 16 said;

When we went to arbitration over a misunderstanding stemming from role conflict arising from examination invigilation at the school, our school head sided with the female teacher, who apparently had a misunderstanding with her family members...It then appeared to me that the school head favoured the female teacher... (Participant 16).

The above snippet depicts a challenge of bias and power dynamics in which the female school head encouraged emotional rather than factual reasoning. Accordingly, the emotional female teacher who was facing personal problems was prioritised. Miller and Manderino (2021) caution that if the motherly

approach to conflict resolution is only intended to soothe troubled officers' feelings, underlying issues of violations of professional obligations may remain unaddressed.

The mother care approach to conflict resolution is not without its challenges; hence, a cautionary stance is warranted to ensure its effectiveness in resolving conflicts within a school organisation. The approach may focus too much on teachers' emotional needs in conflict rather than addressing the root causes objectively, which could lead to unresolved issues if not balanced appropriately. The mother care approach obligates a female school head to act beyond mere gentleness, as this can undermine authority, making it difficult to enforce a resolution.

Another challenge that emerged from participants' opinions was gendered expectations. These were societal norms about what female school leaders should do —and how they should lead and handle conflicts. This was reflected in the comment given by one male participant who said;

I am concerned about how our female school head tends to handle conflict issues... she is rather soft (a common attribute for women) and not bold. If our head were male, I think he would be daring. This general attribute of being soft delays conflict resolution (Participant 10).

The above reflected a risk of gendered backlash, in which female leaders faced criticism for being soft or not assertive enough during tense conflicts.

Theme Two: the relational strategy

Findings from this study also revealed that female secondary school heads employed the relational strategy in conflict resolution. Participants' narratives indicated that female secondary school heads adopted collaborative, relationship-oriented approaches to conflict resolution. This could be attributed to socio-cultural influences that shape women's leadership styles in conflict management. Alluding to the relational approach for conflict resolution, one participant said;

I remember I had a serious disagreement with one parent over the student's absenteeism...I blamed the parent because the student was given the responsibility of looking after a baby while the mother went for ...The parent crossed over me, and tension arose. Our female school head arranged a meeting with both of us and encouraged open dialogue, acknowledging both of our sentiments and helping us reach common ground...(Participant 10).

Similarly, a relational conflict resolution strategy was used to resolve staff disagreements as illustrated in the following snippet;

We had a misunderstanding among ourselves over the use of sports fields. I belonged to the sports house called Red, and I disagreed with a teacher in Yellow over who could use the tracks first for relays. This caused discord among staff members across the different houses...Our headmistress called us to a meeting and encouraged a collaborative discussion, directing us to understand

each other to work as a team...
(Participant 11).

Another situation revealed by the study in which female school heads used the relational conflict resolution strategy was in addressing teachers' emotional or personal issues. One teacher who had difficulties in work performance caused by gender-based violence by her husband at home approached the school head for help. The teacher said;

As I narrated my story to my school head concerning gender-based violence perpetrated against me by my husband, she offered supportive listening. She consoled me, and after a week, she connected me with a counselling service team in the district. The counselling team took steps to alert my husband to desist from this gender-based violence ... (Participant 12).

Similarly, in a case where a female secondary school head managed teacher disputes, a relational conflict resolution strategy was employed. Participant 13 remarked;

At our school, I was assigned two rooms in a house with five rooms, with the other three rooms assigned to another married male teacher. We had a disagreement that escalated, affecting our relationship and our working atmosphere. Our school head met with me individually and later met with the other teacher. The school head listened to our perspectives, showing understanding and concern, and then facilitated a joint discussion. In that joint discussion, she emphasised the importance of empathy and encouraged reconciliation. (Participant 13).

This study established that female school leaders' gendered approach to conflict

resolution is grounded in the utility of relational strategies, which are analogous to motherly care and to women's sociocultural attributes of valuing harmony, inclusivity, and collaborative communication. Female secondary school heads employed a combination of relational and motherly care strategies for conflict resolution to foster a conducive school climate and positively impact students' learning. The utility of the relational conflict-resolution strategy reflected what female school heads valued most in fostering a peaceful school climate. Thus, this study concurs with a gendered view that women have cognitive empathy (Keren, Shiri, & Shiri, 2021), which refers to the ability to put oneself in another's shoes, giving female school leaders the open-mindedness needed to understand a situation from different perspectives and connect with others on a personal and professional level. As reflected in the snippets of narration given above, teacher-teacher conflicts can divert attention away from a unified teaching and a lack of collaboration, thereby impeding professional learning and the sharing of effective teaching practices (Valente, Afonso Lourenço, & Németh, 2022). The female school heads employed a relational conflict-resolution strategy (to promote teamwork) that stems from their gendered emotional connections with their subordinates resorting to using their 'soft skill of empathy' (Greenberg, Warrier, & Abu-Akel, 2022). The female school heads were able to leverage this natural and gendered aptitude in the workplace to gain trust, influence staff members, and nurture a peaceful climate of purposeful teamwork.

Common challenges associated with the relational strategies employed by female secondary school leaders included gendered social dynamics and unequal power dynamics. Social standing in a society or institution

influenced who had their voice heard. One male teacher remarked;

There were instances when I felt my voice wasn't heard because our school is dominated by female officers and led by a female leader... so when our misunderstanding about who should teach the examination classes arose, the female teachers' preferences were noted and accepted. I felt this was somewhat biased in favour of female teachers (Participant 14)

In a similar sentiment, another male teacher complained that the female school head favoured female teachers, as he remarked,

Our school head shows more empathy to female teachers than to male teachers. I remember that female teachers were assigned to supervise indoor games, while male teachers supervised outdoor games, depending on the weather. When we asked for rotational roles, we were denied the opportunity... (Participant 17)

From the narratives of some participants, female secondary school heads employed relational strategies in conflict resolution, reflecting unconsciously or consciously biased conflict resolution. Apart from the gendered social location challenge, there was the fear of social consequences or labelling. This was given by two female teachers who were single mothers. One single mother said,

When a conflict arose, I found it difficult to express my views, as I feared being labelled a troublemaker. I used to do so only when I felt it was rational to go against irrational views. For that reason, I was referred to as a troublemaker, a single mother (Participant 18).

Similarly, one female teacher said,

During times when the school went on trips where the teachers had to be with learners, single mothers were asked to go on duty. When I complained that this was unfair, I suggested that married mothers should be on duty as well. Most of the married teachers labelled me as a troublemaker who was against the generality of married mothers, who apparently were favoured by the school leader (Participant 19)

Based on the views of some participants, school leaders could do well to create school-wide messaging channels that convey that workplace conflict is a learning opportunity, not a stigma. When resolving conflicts, leaders need to ensure that some concerned individuals are not left out; instead, they should be encouraged to speak out. The school leader must undertake a comprehensive involvement of everyone in conflict resolution to ensure that perspectives are considered, subsequently enhancing effective and sustainable solutions (Emmanuel, 2024)

Theme Three: the inclusive gender-sensitive approach for conflict resolution

The study found that female secondary school heads in the study sites also used an inclusive, gender-sensitive approach to conflict resolution in some situations. The inclusive, gender-sensitive approach refers to a school leadership and management mindset and a set of practices used by female school leaders to ensure that conflict resolution is fair, accessible, and safe for all, regardless of gender. In handling conflicts between a female teacher and a male teacher over a misunderstanding caused by a given afternoon timetable, one of the studied female secondary school heads was reported to have used the

inclusive gender-sensitive approach as reflected in the following comments;

I was supposed to breastfeed my baby, extending my lunch hour...This did not go well with my HOD, who complained that learners were left with no one to supervise and were making noise. He suggested that the lunch hour was enough time for breastfeeding my baby. We went to the school head for arbitration. Our school head referred to the public service commission policy concerning breastfeeding time for lactating mothers...the timetable was rescheduled to ensure that learners were occupied during the breastfeeding time...our school head encouraged us to work as a team (Participant 14)

The strength of the approach was that teachers trusted their school head, who used policy to guide professional duties and encouraged teachers to understand one another. In addition, the teachers were reminded to work as a team and support each other during times of need.

In a similar vein, one participant narrated how the school head resolved a dispute over the school's dress code policy for female teachers and the girl child. The participant said;

It was the school policy that female teachers were not allowed to wear trousers. We had a week-long cold period, which made us uncomfortable. We complained to the school head, who then engaged the responsible authority. A meeting was convened with all teachers, the school development committee, and the education secretary of our church school. The outcome was that the responsible authority allowed female

teachers and female students to wear trousers...(Participant 13).

Similarly, the school heads were reported to utilise the inclusive gender-sensitive approach in conflict resolution when addressing the parent-school disagreements over the school uniform policy, as reflected in the following snippet;

When the school announced its intention to change the school uniform, parents disagreed on the dress code at the first meeting. A task force was set up to find and capture ideas that could help to ensure safety, inclusivity, and sensitivity while offering alternatives that respect diverse gender identities. The second meeting finalised the matter as the uniform components were clarified ... (Participant 14).

Although the school heads employed an inclusive, gender-sensitive approach to conflict resolution, participants reported some challenges. Some challenges centred on the persistence of gender stereotypes, particularly regarding women's social roles. This was evident from one participant who commented as follows;

I believe that our female school head did not realise that female teachers are socially expected to breastfeed. I thought it was enough for lactating teachers to breastfeed during lunchtime so they could attend to students afterwards. In this regard, our school head was not confident enough to instruct the female teachers to continue working and to never hide behind claims of breastfeeding time... (Participant 7).

Similarly, another participant commented that the school head was not bold enough to make

a quick decision on adopting a new school uniform.

The change of uniform took a long time... we could have implemented it two years ago, but our school head failed to be firm with parents and other stakeholders who resisted. If our school head were a man, I think such changes could not be delayed... so we had to undertake more consultations than we expected (Participant 8).

The above narrations revealed that one of the obstacles in implementing an inclusive gender-sensitive approach was gender stereotyping. Some male teachers believed that a male school head could be more assertive than a female school head in handling conflict. This reflects the findings from South Africa, where gender stereotyping influences perceptions about school leadership assertiveness (Akinola & Naidoo, 2024). Gender stereotyping stems from subjective biases that most African societies have deeply entrenched in their cultures and their deeply embedded social attitudes towards women. Gender stereotyping creates impediments that affect female school heads as they undertake conflict resolution at their workplaces. Furthermore, Dzingirai and Chauraya (2022) and Ndebele (2018) caution that if gender stereotyping is left unchecked, it continues to contribute to the marginalisation of females in leadership positions in educational institutions.

The other challenge cited as an impediment to the effective implementation of an inclusive, gender-sensitive approach to conflict resolution was compliance with responsible authorities. This was evident from a remark by one of the participants about delays in conflict resolution, as the school head had to consult the accountable authority first. The participant said;

Our school head took a long time before resolving conflicts between departments, which required resources such as textbooks, soccer balls, and whistles. This is because, as a church school, our school head had to consult the responsible authority before giving the final resolution. Due to such delays, one of our male teachers resigned from the post of sports director ... (Participant 4).

The above comment suggests that the responsible authorities at the studied schools contributed to ineffective conflict resolution due to delays in decision-making. This finding is consistent with other findings elsewhere in Zimbabwe, where the church's responsible authorities are seen to sometimes delay resolutions for conflicts, especially where church values appear to be undermined (Nyarugwe, Rudhunbu, Chinara, & Kurebwa, 2022).

Conclusions and Recommendations

According to this study, the conflict resolution strategies employed by female school leaders are socially constructed, grounded in gender expectations, and require addressing these gendered aspects. The study concludes that three commonly used gendered conflict-resolution strategies among female secondary leaders include a motherly approach, a relational approach, and an inclusive, gender-sensitive approach. The study also concludes that there are some challenges faced in the utility of these three conflict resolution strategies.

Based on the conclusions above, the study recommends the following for school leadership practice:

- First, school leaders should proactively invest in conflict-resolution training. This training should involve school heads and their leadership teams, equipping them to manage conflicts effectively at the school level. This can be done through social-emotional programmes run by schools' Psychological Services and through promoting effective communication. In addition, conflict

resolution training should also incorporate training to challenge stereotypes that impede conflict resolution, such as the gendered expectations that women should be nurturing or men should be assertive, which, in the long run, will influence conflict-related behaviours. Further recommendations include the empowerment of school management in inclusive and transformational leadership skills to assist school management in identifying diverse skills within their teachers and ancillary staff, and ensure all stakeholders' involvement in decision-making to circumvent conflicts

- Secondly, when conflicts arise, an appropriate intervention approach should be employed, taking into cognisance that minor disputes can be resolved through peer mediation whilst more serious cases are a preserve for administrative involvement and disciplinary action guided by public service policy. School heads should use gender-inclusive mediation approaches, conceivably pairing mediators or facilitators who comprehend gender dynamics, to ensure objective processing of conflicts.
- Thirdly, school heads should undertake restorative practices to repair harm and rebuild relationships destroyed by conflicts. This can be accomplished by facilitating dialogues between conflicting parties, focusing on understanding the effects of actions, and converging on modalities to make amends.
- Finally, whilst this study provided insights into the gendered constructed conflict resolution strategies and challenges faced by female secondary school leaders in Chivi, some areas warrant further exploration. Explorations focusing on conflict management in the contexts of primary school leadership, teachers' training colleges and universities in Zimbabwe can be conducted.

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