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Gender Politics and Zimbabwe Universities: Facets, Contexts, and Consequences

By Efiritha Chauraya¹

Abstract

This study explores the perceptions of female middle managers of academic faculties at three universities in Zimbabwe to ascertain their lived experiences, feelings, opinions, and views regarding gender equality in the discharge of their duties. Open-ended, semi-structured, and in-depth interviews were employed for data collection. This method enabled the female deans to describe and reflect on their experiences. Engagement with the female deans of academic faculties revealed that: a) Promotion of women into deanship positions did not translate into eradication of gender-based discrimination against them; b) A lack of a broader vision of gender equality was observed which limited conscious efforts to address all facets of gender equality. Gender equality, as enshrined in some of the universities' mission statements, remains just rhetoric rather than reality; c) No gender training, sensitization, or awareness was conducted at the institutions; hence a culture of conscious gender inclusion was not cultivated; d) The mainstream attitudes and relations that once kept women at bay were never interrogated when these female deans were hired. This indicated that the integrationist strategy of mainstreaming women into leadership lacked a transformative ethic or revolutionary potential e) Gender inequality tended to lower self-esteem, productivity, and efficiency of the female deans. This study concluded that hegemonic masculinity was very alive, strongly felt, and experienced by women deans despite the strides to achieve gender parity. This article--which brings out the nature, context, and consequences of the exclusionary tendencies towards female deans--ends by providing a prescription that could see universities' aspirations for gender equality turned into accomplishments and excellence as far as middle-level leadership is concerned. This prescription is the novelty of the study.

Keywords: Gender equality, Gender mainstreaming, Higher education

Introduction

Zimbabwe is heralded as one country where men's vis-à-vis women's education has progressed tremendously, and great strides are being made to achieve parity in the various sectors of the economy. Yet the question that comes to mind is: Does this mean that gender equality is being achieved? Authorities such as David (2015), Forum for African Women Educationist (FAWE) (2015), as well as Nesterova & Jackson (2018) have responded with a resounding "No, it is not the case." The authorities maintain that while numbers are crucial for improving access, they are not adequate for achieving gender equality in terms of challenging social structures. Even where women outnumber men, exclusionary dynamics may create gender inequality. Access is just one of the multiple indicators of gender equality (Ibarra et al., 2013). This study explains the context of academic faculty leadership as one of the areas in which strides being made to achieve gender parity may not necessarily translate into gender equality.

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Background to Current Study

There is a wealth of information on gender politics in Higher Education. For example, Pritchard (2007) studied the phenomenon in British and German universities, while Winchester & Browning (2015) studied the same in Australian universities. Pritchard's (2007) quantitative study compared men's and women's contribution in Higher Education (HE), Winchester & Browning (2015) provided a critical reflection on growth of the women faculty in HE. O'Connor et al. (2015) and Parvazian et al. (2017) also studied HE. While O'Connor et al. (2015) concentrated on recruitment and retention of girls in HE and limited access of women to leadership positions, Parvazian et al. (2017) provided an analysis of relationships between increased participation in HE and changes made in the women's lives such as potential earning power, fertility behaviour, and family arrangements. Close to this study are works by Ibarra et al. (2013) who explored the unseen barriers to women rising to positions of power.

There is a dearth of academic research on lived experiences of women leading academic faculties in universities in Zimbabwe, perhaps because the rise of women to these positions is quite a recent phenomenon in Zimbabwe. This study examines the perceptions of female deans in academic faculties to ascertain their views on how they feel they are treated by their superiors, peers, and subordinates in the discharge of their duties. Specific areas included: (i) the value and respect attached to their work by superiors and subordinates, (ii) the degree of respect received from fellow male counterparts, and (iii) how gender equality was interpreted by the studied universities.

There are numerous payoffs for inclusion of women into leadership. Arguing from a Higher Education perspective, O'Connor et al. (2015) enumerate some of the key benefits of inclusivity. Inclusion of women in leadership is one of the avenues that leads to promotion of gender equality. Additional literature (Williams, 2004; David, 2015; O'Connor et al., 2015; Stoet & Geary, 2020) reveal that gender equality, outside of being a social justice issue, also leads to economic growth and benefits.

Theoretical Framework: Social Constructivism Theory

The theoretical base that guides this study is the social constructivism theory as espoused by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. According to this theory, human beings develop knowledge and perceptions through their interactions with their environments (Vygotsky, 1978). This article seeks to unravel the perceptions of university female managers when it comes to gender equality in their work environments. The notion of perception is central to this study: the ways in which the female managers built their consciousness to understand experiences of gender equality and acted in response to their experiences. There is a confirmed link between perceptions and human behaviour (Pickens, 2005) as perceptions define and influence how individuals view their situations to inform how they behave in those situations (Palinscar, 1998; Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002).

The theory of social constructivism was selected for this study based on the crucial claim and central idea of social constructivism: that social environments and individual perceptions are undeniably interdependent. As such, the female managers' perceptions influenced their interactions with their work environment. The female managers constructed their perceptions based upon their lived experiences—cultivated by observation and participation—with their subordinates, superiors, and fellow male managers. In this article, the social constructivism theory acts as a lens to explore the perceptions of female managers in universities and ascertain their lived experiences, feelings, and opinions regarding gender equality in the performance of their duties.

The Concept of Gender Equality

There are many ongoing discussions about what gender equality means, but at the root of these discussions is the idea that the principle and practice of gender equality means equality of human beings regardless of their gender status. According to UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia (2017), gender equality is the attainment of equal valuation by communities and societies of the similarities and differences of their men and women. In the workplace, gender equality entails men and women becoming equal partners regardless of gender. The creation of a gender equal environment sets equal conditions for men and women to access rights and to contribute to the workplace. In this environment, access to opportunities does not depend on one's gender.

The Narrow View versus the Broad Vision of Gender Equality

Literature reveals two visions of gender equality: the narrow versus the broad (FAWE, 2015; Nesterova & Johnson, 2018). These two visions depend on the idea that gender discrimination and bias can exist in two forms: the visible and the subtle. Visible gender discrimination is that which can be seen and quantified such as employment statistics, while subtle discrimination is buried under the surface. Issues of parity address the quantifiable dimensions of gender equality, but growing literature reveals that gender discrimination is less identifiable in statistics, and more subtly embedded in issues such as culture, tradition, and relationships (Mulwa, 2021). In its subtle form, gender inequality cannot be seen, but only felt; statistics on their own are not enough. Study after study (Dunn, Gerlach, & Hyle, 2014; FAWE, 2015; Nesterova & Johnson, 2018; Mulwa, 2021) reveal that insisting and stopping at gender parity levels make gender equality lose its robust meaning and, as a result, its transformative edge. It was the intention of this study to establish which vision of gender equality each of the observed institutions held.

Benefits that Gender Equality Brings to Universities

Attaining gender equality leads to numerous benefits for individuals and their institutions (Government of Canada, 2021). In almost every sector of the economy, gender equality is a vital route to the attainment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNDP, 2018). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development envisions “universal respect for human rights and human dignity where every woman and girl enjoy full gender equality and all...barriers to their empowerment...removed” (UNDP, 2018, p. 1). Gender equality holds great value and considerable payoffs for the public good; bridging the gender divide benefits humankind at large. Specifically, in universities, a gender equality perspective facilitates the creation of a world without limits as it affords all people a fair opportunity to improve their lives. This inevitably leads to a high quality of life for all concerned as all are accorded just opportunities to develop their personal abilities free of limitations set by prejudices and stereotypes. A culture of equal opportunities has been proven to attract and retain qualified staff in universities (David, 2015; McIntyre et al, 2002, as cited in O'Connor, 2015). A culture of gender equality breeds and nurtures respected leadership as having both men and women in leadership positions increases all genders' opportunities to significantly influence institutional decisions (Neale, 2011, as cited in O'Connor 2015). People of all genders will provide role models for their respective future generations, more so for the women who have been continuously underrepresented in leadership positions (FAWE, 2015). In the three studied institutions, the number of PhD holders among women has grown from zero in 2000 to eight women in 2010, 33 women in 2015, and 61 women in 2021 for Nehanda University. At Chaminuka University, the number of women with a PhD qualification rose from three in 2010 to 12 in 2015, and 22 in 2021. At Kaguvi University, the number rose from one in 2010 to 16 in 2021 (Statistics supplied by the Postgraduate Offices on 12 February 2021). If these trends

continue, parity and a reversal of inequality may be witnessed. This study examined PhD attainment because meritocratic criteria for accessing titles at the three universities was based on educational attainment, and a PhD was pre-requisite for promotion and appointment as dean of a faculty. Universities in Zimbabwe, like elsewhere, are responsible for recruitment of their staff and appointment of staff to leadership positions. At these institutions, the growing number of women with requisite qualifications for faculty leadership has seen a perceptible increase in the number of women being appointed to lead units and sections at the institutions. An increase of women in academic faculty leadership has occurred, but there are still universities in Zimbabwe that have all their academic faculties led by men. Thus, the numbers of women heading faculties at the studied institutions, although few, were considered significant considering that women were completely absent in these upper tiers of universities in Zimbabwe.

According to the “role model effect” as espoused by Quenzel & Hurrelmann (2012) and Mulwa (2021), when relatable role models exist, their respective gender is likely to prosper compared to when there is a lack of access to them. The authorities go further to say that where there is a lack of role models to inspire others, there are achievement deficits as women have no one to identify with. Role models are therefore an intrinsic psychological motivator because they remove barriers that would otherwise prevent women from achievement. It goes without saying that fair representations of men and women have social development benefits (Stoet & Geary, 2020; Mulwa, 2021). Because of these benefits, women’s access to leadership positions in universities is a priority, especially in Africa where women have been absent from leadership positions until quite recently.

Mainstreaming Women in University Leadership

Jahan (1995), Lombardo (2003), and Walby (2005) proffer two approaches to women’s inclusion in mainstream leadership: Integrationist and Agenda Setting. The Integrationist strategy fits women into mainstream leadership “as it is, in a political order from which they are currently excluded” (Chauraya 2011, p. 63). Many scholars lament this approach, arguing that it fails to challenge prevailing social structures and the status quo. Weighing in on the Integrationist strategy’s lack of transformative capacity, Jahan (1995) is of the view that the strategy is incapacitated by its lack of interrogation of the mainstream. Of the same opinion, Lombardo (2003, p. 415) says the lack of interrogation of the status quo robs the strategy of its “revolutionary potential.”

Agenda Setting, on the other hand, involves a transformation and reorientation of the existing mainstream (Lombardo 2003). Women do not just become add-ons in the leadership mainstreaming, but they also reorient the nature of the mainstream (Jahan, 1995). Reflecting on narrow versus broad views of gender equality, it appears that there is a perfect fit between the Agenda Setting approach and the broader vision of gender equality. Jahan (1995) and Lombardo (2003) concur that agenda setting is a more holistic approach of mainstreaming women into leadership as there is a re-articulation, rethinking, and reorienting of the status quo. If the mainstream is not dislodged or reoriented, inclusion of women runs “the risk of becoming a marginalised issue” (Lombardo, 2003, p. 427). This study sought to establish the gender mainstreaming strategy these universities were pursuing.

Methodology

This article was guided by the interpretive paradigm because of its social nature. In line with the chosen paradigm, a qualitative approach was adopted as the desire was to get an insider perspective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In this study, the insiders were the women faculty heads operating in a gender discriminatory and biased environment. Choosing the interpretive approach dictated the choice of the semi-structured interview as a data gathering tool for this

study. The interview questions encouraged the deans to reflect on their lived experiences in their day to day running of their faculties. Follow up questions were posed where further explanations were needed to thoroughly understand the deans' perceptions, opinions, and views. These follow up questions encouraged the deans to reflect on specific events that they felt critical as they described their own experiences. This was quite useful as it allowed development of an in-depth, contextualised understanding of the deans' experiences. The interviews with the seven deans were held from the 26th of March to the 10th of April 2021 in the deans' offices, observing and adhering to COVID-19 requirements.

The female deans of academic faculties at the three universities formed the participants of this study. Two of the universities were state institutions, while the other was a private university. Selection of these three universities was guided by the universities' claims to sensitivity when it came to issues of gender; some had gender equality and equity clauses enshrined in their vision and mission statements. The study sought to establish whether these equality/equity clauses were converted into action. While the researcher wanted to include more universities, the challenge was that these were the only ones that explicitly broadcasted being driven by a gender equality ethos.

Table 1: The Research Participants

University	Name of participants from the university	Dean's faculty	Number of participants
Nehanda	A, B	Commerce, Social Science	2
Chaminuka	C, D, E	Education, Commerce & Arts	3
Kaguvi	F, G	Hard Sciences & Education	2
			N = 7

In this study, the research design was a collective case study as advanced by Stake (2003), the case being "the lived experiences, opinions, and views of female deans regarding gender equality in the discharge of their duties." Each university was studied as part of the collection (Yin, 2003) and as such no generalizing claims are made for settings not yet studied (Lincoln & Guba, 2002). Data generated were purely qualitative and as such were inductively analysed. After transcription of data, the researcher sent the transcripts to the seven members for checking (Patton, 2015). From the deans' accounts, references to how they felt treated and valued by their superiors, male colleagues, and subordinates were identified and closely analyzed (Creswell, 2017). Utilizing the grounded theory approach as espoused by Braun & Clarke (2013), Strauss & Corbin (1990) on qualitative data analysis, analytical categories that reflected aspects of the deans' lived experiences were developed through an iterative and inductive process using the field notes data and the transcribed data. After analysing the data, the ideas that emerged from this were first tagged with codes then grouped within specific categories that summarized them to permit generation of patterns and emergence of relationships (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2013). This article draws from this analysis to present the four key issues that emerged from the data.

Research Findings and Discussion

Perceived Value and Respect Placed on the Female Deans' Work

Conversations with the seven deans pointed to a pattern of them perceiving their work as being subjected to a different standard by their subordinates (5/7) and by their superiors (6/7). Dean A shared what she felt was an uphill task that her male counterparts were not subjected to. She only gave an account of one such experience:

Talking with the boss trying to convince him on the need to hire more human resource in the faculty has been a tall order. It has always been emotional labour. An informal talk with the only other female dean here, she seemed to have experienced the same negotiation hassle. The males seem to be quickly paid attention to than us. We have to explain ourselves harder than them before we are taken seriously.

Dean D lamented her experience when she approached her superior with challenges of high staff turn-over. She also said this encounter was one of the many:

When I presented the challenge of high staff turn-over to my superior, the immediate response was: 'there is no problem. We can always hire new staff.' When I finally managed to convince him to see that the high attrition rate was a challenge, the problem was seen as me, the woman. We women get viewed as bearers of deficits that make one look at oneself as having fewer natural aptitudes for leadership. I more often than not cannot help feeling treated as being non-capable of engaging meaningfully and successfully with subordinates. It is more to do with how we women are viewed.

There was a general feeling among the deans that they felt lesser valued and respected than their male counterparts. They were of the view that some of their subordinates seemed not to appreciate their skills and capability to lead not because of anything aside from the fact that they were women. They concurred that the practice drained their commitment. Literature holds that one must be recognized as a capable leader to gain a sense of self as a leader. When people question a person's fitness for the role of deanship, it may drain their zeal for the job (Bingham & Nix, 2010; Ibarra et al, 2013; World Economic Forum, 2020). With similar observations and experiences, dean G said:

Rationality and capability are doubted by our superiors. I would also say the same of our subordinates. With subordinates, surprisingly, it is usually the females who doubt more than the males. Our work is scrutinized more, and we are allowed a marginal latitude to make errors something I do not see happening to our male counterparts. In fact, theirs are not considered errors but oversights.

In a similar vein, dean C said:

I particularly get sick with the way deans' presentations in meetings and workshops get treated. When a male dean presents say a report, very few questions are raised about the work by fellow male deans and superiors. When a female dean or director makes a presentation, tables automatically turn. Few positives get raised. It sort of sounds their doubting your credibility as a dean and you know it drains and crushes one's passion for the post. We are of lesser

value to management as everything is weighted in men's favour. Our gender is quite visible to them and in a negative way.

Dean G's observation on heightened scrutiny of their work was shared by two other deans (D, B). They expressed that they found their subordinates, especially the female subordinates, attributing the deans' promotion to any influence other than merit. On this observation, dean B had this to say:

Our subordinates query our ages rather than our ability to discharge our duties, or even the amount of our research output. Some even want to dig into our private lives and establish a lot about our private lives, something they do not do about our male colleagues. I, for one, am a divorcee, and I know another male dean who is also a divorcee, but talk is about me not him also. These are the unequal social circumstances among other micro gender politics that we deal with every day.

Male deans tended to benefit from friendlier environments; by virtue of their gender, they were more respected and so tended to not experience any difficulties engaging with male superiors or subordinates.

Politics of Monopoly and Exclusion

Where circumstances excluded them, female deans lamented what I call the "politics of monopoly and exclusion." First to give an account of her experiences of the politics of exclusion was dean A. The following is a chronicle of her ordeal:

Before the COVID-19 pandemic it was worse than now, because our superiors used to meet with us informally at the senior common room (canteen for senior members of staff). We women used to go there mainly for launch, but most of our male colleagues would stay longer drinking alcohol for there is a small bar there. Tell you what, this space (the bar) came to be called the staffroom because important institutional issues and decisions got discussed there. Formal meetings used only to rubber stamp these decisions. We women would not access these discussions. We do not drink alcohol. So, you see, we need to be equal partners in society before we talk of formalities at work. Requiring that we women be included into leadership is necessary, but that's on its own may not be sufficient because we are there but excluded. Our inclusion now is cosmetic, just one of those window dressing gestures. When we try to join them, they make us feel uncomfortable.

A similar observation and remark were registered by dean E:

It is normal practice to see our fellow male counterparts sometimes in the company of our superiors charting by the car park. We women cannot hold such charts. How many are we? At this institution we are just three at my level. We just greet superiors and part ways. When you are in a meeting you hear, reference being made to some of these informal charts. A case in point was when they held a discussion over what type of vehicles to buy for the executive deans of faculties. Anything for us without us is not for us. That we are treated differently from our male counterparts cannot be denied. We are in leadership but isolated.

Dean G talked about men's social soccer clubs, where men spent the greater part of their Sunday afternoons watching social soccer and discussing the country's politics and social issues. Occasionally, institutional affairs were discussed in these settings. Women do not frequent these spaces, therefore losing the ability to discuss important matters. These practices fit into men's lives during a time when leadership was male-dominated. I suggest that these practices are not designed to discriminate, but the effect unintentionally puts women at a disadvantage. In Zimbabwe, men are socialized for public events such as soccer watching, and it is common for them to form their *Indaba* (small court) there, which also permits bonding between men.

Women, on the other hand, are expected to be private and indoors. This could explain why the men made women who joined them feel uncomfortable (refer to earlier account by dean A). The implication of this intimidation is that women were not appropriate or did not belong in these spaces. This could also explain the bonding between male deans and male superiors which the female deans interpreted as having more power, being more valued, and having more influence. I suggest that bonding or absence of bonding was not done intentionally, but as Nesterova & Johnson (2018, p. 2) observe, maybe "part of the accepted and taken-for-granted social relationships" naturalised and dressed up as tradition. This is what Ibarra et al. (2013) call "second generation bias," which are practices that give women the short end of the stick through creation and maintenance of contexts and environments in which women fail to excel or even thrive. With such practices, exclusion is not conscious, deliberate, or planned for. Rather, it is a culmination of organization practices and cultural assumptions that benefit men while posing a disadvantage for women.

Perceived Degree of Respect Received from Fellow Male Deans

Almost all the female deans (6/7) felt viewed and treated by their fellow male deans in accordance with traditional gender roles, although the degree varied with each individual. Some reported an explicit feeling (3/7) [A, E, G], while others said the treatment was camouflaged as respect (3/7) [B, C D]. One dean felt equally valued, heard, and respected [F]. Following is dean A's account of explicit disrespect:

As faculty deans at this institution, we have our platform, and it so happened that one of our directors had lost his mother and it was planned and agreed that we physically visit the director and convey our condolences. A programme produced by a male dean, without any consultation with me, indicated that I was going to make an opening prayer. First, I felt insulted that someone just puts me on a programme without consultation. Was that not bullying and 'machismo' behaviour? Second, I felt gender-offended, because I would not help thinking that he had picked on me because of the link between 'women and praying'. I decided not to attend, and I later heard that no prayer was said. I also collected that the other female dean did not attend because she was not feeling well.

In another university, dean E said she was asked by other male deans to take minutes on a sub-committee set up by their senate to consider an issue and report to the main committee the outcome of their deliberations as a recommendation. This subcommittee was comprised of four deans—three males and one female (dean E). She questioned why they chose her to write the meeting minutes, alleging that she could not help thinking that they chose her because she is a woman. She ended with the statement, "Our male colleagues do not see us as their peers, but women before we are peers even at boardroom level."

Dean D said there were four of them travelling from a workshop back home. The workshop had been held in a different city and while travelling to their home city, their car developed a problem requiring them to drive at a lower speed. One of the cars carrying three of their colleagues came by and indicated that they had space for only one member:

The 3 men I was travelling with all indicated that it was to be me although one of the male colleagues had a health condition, we were aware of. Whether this was respect I don't know, but I could palpably feel that it was a decision taken on gender lines.

The female deans felt discriminated against and sexualized based on their gender. The female deans experienced hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy that manifested in various forms rationalized as cultural tradition. However, while admitting that it made their job unpleasant, none among the female deans indicated any intention or decision to step down from deanship.

Vision of Gender Equality by University Actors

At the studied universities, steps were taken to bring more women into leadership. Dean B said "At my university, there is a vigorous attempt to increase the female cohort in leadership positions as almost all female professors have been assigned an area to head." However, further engagements with the female deans revealed that despite efforts to narrow the gender gap, there was no other institutional initiative to support the women promoted to leadership positions. This observation coincided with very recent observations made on Sub-Saharan Africa universities by Mulwa (2021) who posits that while progress was being made to bring women into leadership, there is a lack of evidence of university support systems for women in leadership positions to champion their cause. A few of the female deans (3/7) who had some awareness of gender studies acquired that knowledge outside of their institutions or from their research studies that entailed some focus on gender issues. Yet literature maintains that although numbers are important, it is pertinent to consider and satisfy the other equally important qualitative dimensions of gender equality (FAWE, 2015). This rather narrow and limited interpretation of gender equality could be an indication of little gender awareness among the actors involved in mainstreaming gender equality at the institutions. It takes intentionality on the part of university management to discover what true gender equality entails. Every initiative gets its momentum from its leaders. The strategy adopted for the inclusion of women into leadership positions was thus Integrationist, where women got added into the mainstream--which was not receptive of them--without gender purification of the mainstream.

Conclusions

The general conclusions supported by this study point to key issues about gender equality. The promotion of women into deanship positions did not translate into eradication of gender-based discrimination against them. The female deans criticized the watered-down recognition, participation, and valuing rendered to them. The studied institutions appeared to lack a broader conception of gender equality and resultantly limited conscious effort to address all the dimensions of gender equality. The universities concentrated only on parity, neglecting the qualitative aspects that studies by David (2015) and FAWE (2015) reveal are critical.

It was also established that while the mission statements of some of the institutions included commitments to gender equality, nothing substantial was done beyond the rhetoric; there was a lag in fulfilling the aspirations. The mission statements were simply documents expressing intentions. No concrete measures were put in place to ensure that the statements were turned into deliverables. This is what Unterhalter et al. (2004, p.1) observed close to a

decade and half ago: “There are no shortages in many countries today of good policies for gender equality...but these policies often remain unimplemented documents.” At the studied institutions, no gender sensitization and awareness training was consciously carried out with the university community. Yet literature reveal that a culture of “conscious inclusion” must be cultivated and nurtured so that leaders need to think and act with a conscious intent of including everyone (Dunn et al., 2014). The universities’ environments were not conducive to career nourishment of the female deans’ leadership as their ability to perform and participate was grossly stifled. Gender inequality, which remained pervasive in the universities, tended to lower the efficiency and productivity of the female deans, since the culture seemed to erode their self-esteem.

Recommendations

The conclusions drawn recommend turning the universities into gender-responsive environments as far as middle-level leadership is concerned. It is quite commendable that the universities have taken the first step--that of increasing women’s access into leadership at the deanship level. The next step should now be creation and maintenance of an environment that facilitates and supports the women in their leadership engagements, thus transforming the mission statements of intentions into reality. The first step in this endeavour is constituting committees that should monitor translations of intentions into deliverables. In the studied institutions, there were established units, although recently set up, that were well placed to shoulder the task. Although these units had particularities, they shared, teaching, advocacy, and consultancy as commonalities. However, other than teaching, other tasks had not been delved into at the time of carrying out this study. The recommendation of this study is that the units be freed from teaching, so that they can concentrate on gender research, advocacy, and university community sensitization.

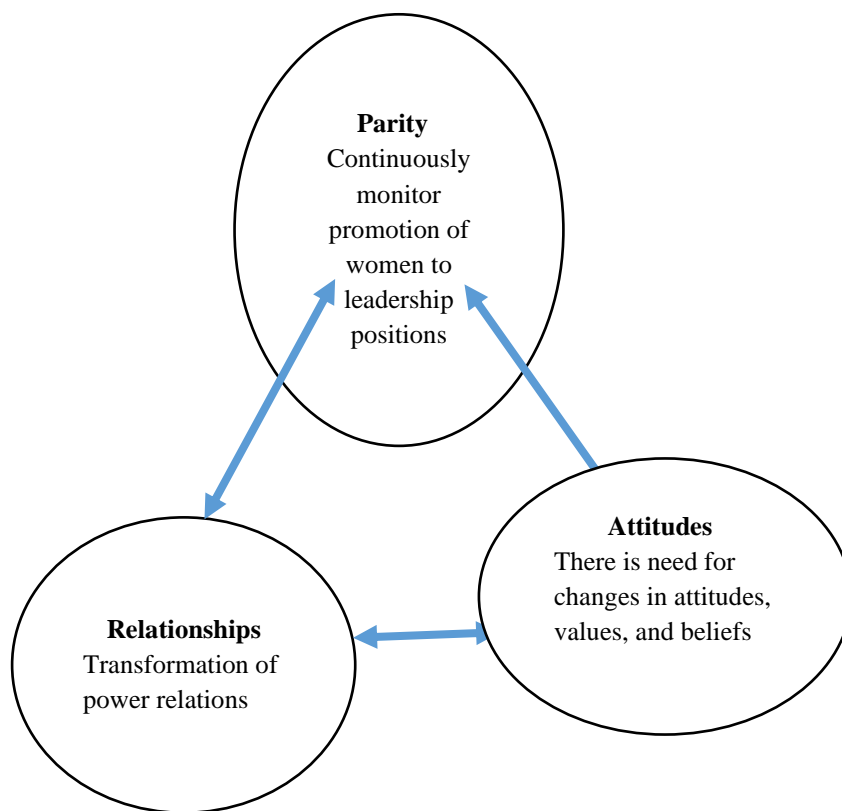
Gender equality action plans showing how the institutions are going to work towards gender equality should be crafted and well laid procedures of how the units are going to monitor the impact of gender initiatives within the institution so that their effectiveness in this endeavor can easily be measured with a view of improving their efficiency. FAWE (2009, p. 4) noted that “In order for a gender-responsive approach to permeate institutional thinking and action, it needs to become an explicit consideration at all levels of the institutional operations.” Gender politics need to be managed and research should inform this management. Research is critical so that context-specific strategies are developed. The focus of these units should be on the socio-cultural environment of leadership since the study found this area most wanting. Such an environment and its context are very critical as the women leaders need to be surrounded with people with inclusive attitudes.

What needs to be transformed are the attitudes about gender relations. A significant body of research shows that the most effective way of managing transformation of gender relations is gender sensitization (Ibarra et al., 2013; FAWE, 2015; Mulwa, 2021). The researcher therefore recommends institutional gender sensitization to break the inhibiting stereotypical forces that maintain and fortify structural inequality. Holding gender sensitization workshops as avenues that address the fragile process of making women part of the mainstream should not be undermined. The researcher particularly recommends this because study findings reveal that in these universities gender discrimination and prejudicial treatment of the female deans was more a result of deep-seated cultural issues anchored in tradition and social organization. In Zimbabwe, lecturers and other university personnel are mostly people raised in patriarchal cultures, and most likely, patriarchy is all they know until they are introduced to alternative possibilities. Writing specifically about the Zimbabwe situation, Guzura & Chigora (2012, p. 27) opine that “Academia has long been dominated by men, and the male perspective in...performance, evaluation and interpersonal interactions generally prevails.” Gender based

differences start with attitudes instilled through gender socialization, so sensitization is de-socialisation and re-socialization in one breath. Gender sensitization transforms the mainstream through a renewal of minds. When approached like this, “women do not only become part of the mainstream, but they also orient the nature of the mainstream” (Jahan, 1995, p.13). The battle is in making the mainstream receptive to the women it once excluded.

Following is a diagram (Figure 1) that the researcher has designed that shows the essential building blocks of a gender responsive middle management leadership context. The centrality and mutual dependence of the indicated dimensions of gender equality should not be undermined. Important to note is that although these gender equality indicators are analytically distinct, they also interact, reciprocate, reinforce, and complement each other.

**Figure 1: Building Gender-Responsive Academic Faculty Leadership:
The Essential Building Blocks**



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